

Exploring Retention through Student Motivation and Engagement in Martial Arts

Education: A Qualitative Narrative Study

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Abstract

High attrition rates among beginner martial arts students pose a persistent challenge for martial arts organizations and limit the long-term physical, psychological, and educational benefits of sustained training. The purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to explore former martial arts students' perceptions of barriers to retention and to examine how motivation and engagement influenced their decision to discontinue training prior to achieving the rank of black belt. Guided by Vroom's expectancy theory, this study sought to better understand the relationship among initial motivation, instructional experiences, and attrition. Data were collected through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with 10 former adult martial arts students who met the study's eligibility criteria. Participants were recruited through social media, word-of-mouth referrals, and community outreach. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using inductive thematic analysis in NVivo®. Member checking and reflexivity were employed to enhance credibility and trustworthiness. The findings revealed that attrition resulted from a convergence of three compounding categories of barriers: Psychological and Emotional Barriers, Expectations-versus-Reality Barriers, and Systemic and Contextual Barriers. Although initial enrollment was often driven by deeply personal motivations—particularly trauma-related self-defense needs—these motivations were insufficient to sustain engagement when instructional practices, curriculum relevance, and organizational stability failed to align with participant expectations. The study contributes to a multidimensional retention model and offers implications for trauma-informed instructional practices, curricular relevance, and systemic reliability. These findings provide actionable guidance for improving retention strategies and inform future research on motivation, engagement, and persistence in martial arts education.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Many martial arts organizations' key concern is attracting and retaining students (Nuñez-Barriopedro et al., 2021). Research in martial arts and combat sports, as well as the motivations that drive individuals to train, is limited and often highly specific to a single discipline or style. Therefore, addressing this issue requires obtaining and understanding the buyer's motivations (Silva & Quaresma, 2019). Little research exists on successful or unsuccessful teaching and learning experiences, and there are few systematic reviews. Therefore, addressing this issue requires understanding buyers' motivations (Reis Da Silva Duarte et al., 2022; Silva & Quaresma, 2019). Freitas and Lacerda (2019) and Kim et al. (2021) noted that customers in the sports and fitness field who reported higher perceived customer service quality also expressed greater satisfaction with the facility. Nevertheless, very little is known about the quality-of-service targets and which ones correlate more closely with customer satisfaction and consumer/buyer behavior.

When instructors have a better understanding of what motivates students, they are empowered to provide more effective instruction, enabling them to access the information needed to modify their teaching practices, which, in turn, makes the instruction more desirable to students (Biscaia et al., 2021). A strong understanding of the student's motivations is a basic tenet of marketing theory and a crucial factor in the success of martial arts organizations (Barbopoulos & Johansson, 2016; Kim et al., 2021). Armed with this knowledge of what motivates buyers, martial arts instructors are integral to developing programs that meet market demands, thereby enabling them to attract and retain customers (Chung et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2021; Nuñez-Barriopedro et al., 2021).

According to Minosky and Dumoulin (2023) and Reis Da Silva Duarte et al. (2022), training in martial arts is conducted by federations and associations, and those who attain a black belt, have the highest degree of technical achievement. Martial arts instruction requires passing belt exams, for which students must meet specific requirements in terms of hours and technical knowledge for each rank before being allowed to advance. Therefore, teachers are limited to repeating the movements and structures passed down to them by their teachers and those before them without receiving theoretical and critical training in both the teaching and learning processes. In this sense, teaching martial arts and combat sports to children, adolescents, recreational adults, adult competitors, and the elderly differs pedagogically (Reis Da Silva Duarte et al., 2022; Tangkudung, 2022). This is why other variables should be considered when planning and formulating the lesson plan, such as the students' goals, age groups, available training/teaching materials, expectations, and more. Since martial arts involve physical contact among students, didactic-pedagogical errors can increase the chances of injuries and potentially lead to student dropout. Therefore, it is reassuring to know that training for these professionals is not just a one-time event but a sustained commitment to student safety and retention (Reis Da Silva Duarte et al., 2022).

Martial arts, combat sports, sports, and fitness organizations are unique when it comes to the environment of customer service, as many of them offer a product in which the customer has the option of being a consumer who chooses to be a spectator of a contest, a client who actively takes part in a sport or physical activity, or both. Client participation is vital to the quality of what the organization offers, as clients often assume multiple roles — such as consumer, participant, or both — and expect to receive something of value in return (Ruihley et al., 2020). These new paradigms and trends take the form of systematic, humanistic, and cultural

approaches, among others (Cynarski, 2019). The quality of training that a consumer seeks may not necessarily come from the equipment, style of training, or environment but rather the customer service and rewards that are shown, given, and gained by the instructor(s) and the owner(s) of the facility, thus making proper education on the wants and needs of the student vital to succeed (Garcia-Pascual, 2023; Mullen et al., 2022; Ruihley et al., 2020).

According to Hofmeister (2018) and Spotbee, Inc. (2024), there is no existing data on how many people participate in martial arts training in the United States; it is believed to be a sizeable minority, reflecting a considerable number of people who act as students and instructors and is representative of over \$4 billion in trade a year, having grown more than 5% from 2013 to 2018. Knowing what motivates a potential buyer will help the business determine what is needed to meet market demand by creating suitable offerings, thereby attracting and potentially retaining customers (Gjestvang, 2020; Kim et al., 2021; Kim & Zhang, 2019). Such knowledge will be beneficial to both existing and future entrepreneurs in the fields of martial arts and combat sports. It will help provide new and innovative ideas that can be directed toward educating the student clientele. This is also good for the market, as entrepreneurship is a key component of societal and economic development, growth, and achievement. This is because the innovative ideas they bring to their specific market can lead to benefits such as improved market efficiency and economic growth (Akinboye et al., 2020).

Statement of the Problem

The problem to be addressed is that the lack of effective strategies for fostering student motivation and engagement among beginner martial arts students leads to high dropout rates, which undermines the long-term educational benefits of martial arts training (Biscaia et al., 2021; Cynarski, 2019; Kim & Zhang, 2019; Ko & Kim, 2010; Silva & Quaresma, 2019).

According to recent statistics, only 1-2% of martial arts students progress to earn their black belts (Bennett, 2022; Bennett, 2024; Evans, 2023; Japanese Martial Arts Center, 2024; Storm Taekwondo, 2023). Student memberships are the primary source of revenue for martial arts facilities. A basic understanding of the buyer's motivation will help in product development and aid in attracting and retaining customers. When instructors have poor strategies that aid in student retention, those rates fall, student motivation and engagement drop, program satisfaction diminishes, the relationship between the instructor and student is weak, and the perception of the value and benefits of martial arts training is low (Bachrach & Schermerhorn, 2020; Barbopoulos & Johansson, 2016; Thomas, 2017).

Many theories exist about what motivates a person to train in martial arts and remain a student for years. However, those are just theories and have not been investigated through scientific study methods, as stated by Kim and Zhang (2019). According to Biscaia et al. (2021), perceived value and overall satisfaction may contribute to martial arts retention issues. Other reasons may include personal competency, well-being, enjoyment, and obligations (Box et al., 2019; Chung et al., 2022; Deelan et al., 2018).

By focusing on retention in martial arts and addressing relevant questions, the study may provide instructors and martial arts school owners with valuable insights to enhance their training curricula. If this problem is not addressed, people may choose not to train in martial arts at all, which could lead to a decline in the number of credible, certified instructors. This may mean that martial arts styles considered defunct and no longer widely practiced become extinct, as there may be no practitioners left to carry on their traditions and legacies.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to explore former martial arts students' perceptions of barriers to retention and identify the strategies and supports that would have promoted sustained engagement and motivation in their martial arts training. This enabled others to better understand the motivational mechanisms underlying retention in martial arts practice and study, while also enhancing students' overall instructional and educational experiences. These findings can serve as a guide for martial arts instructors on how potential and current students prefer to be taught and on the best practices for maintaining student retention (Kim & Zhang, 2019; Thomas, 2017). The administrators of martial arts programs must identify unique variables that directly affect an individual's decision to continue training (Kim et al., 2021). Few studies have empirically tested consumer satisfaction; this study focused on the satisfaction, expectations, and retention of client participants within a martial arts, sports, or fitness-based facility. To collect the data, 10 former students from various martial arts disciplines and locations were asked a series of carefully crafted questions about their training experiences. Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews.

Introduction to Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework guiding this qualitative narrative study will be Victor Vroom's 1964 expectancy theory (ET), also known as the expectancy theory of motivation. The theory is a mental process related to choice or decision-making. The theory explains the processes individuals go through when making choices. The theory emphasizes the need for organizations to relate rewards directly to performance and ensure that the recipients both deserve and desire those rewards (Bachrach & Schermerhorn, 2020; Bateman et al., 2019; Burton et al., 2020; Vroom, 1964; Zboja et al., 2020). In the case of martial arts, this could be a belt/rank promotion

or the long-term achievement of earning the highest degree of technical improvement, a black belt (Minosky & Dumoulin, 2023; Reis Da Silva Duarte et al., 2022).

According to Bateman et al. (2019) and Vroom (1964), people behave based on the perceived likelihood that their effort will result in a specific outcome and the degree to which they desire that outcome. As a cognitive theory of motivation, ET is based on three variables: *expectancy*, *instrumentality*, and *valence*. Expectancy is based on their confidence that their effort will lead to a good performance. Instrumentality then comes in the form of a question about whether their good performance will be rewarded with the desired outcomes. Therefore, expectancy links effort to performance, and instrumentality links performance to outcome valence (Bateman et al., 2019; Vroom, 1964; Zboja et al., 2020).

To determine and select the most effective motivational methods, researchers rely on the instructional situation to guide their decisions. The instructional situation includes the parts of conditions, desires, and values (Reigeluth & Carr-Chellman, 2009; Reigeluth et al., 2017). In 1964, Vroom defined motivation as a process that governs choices among alternative voluntary activities that the individual controls. Motivation is a product of the individual's expectancy that a specific effort will lead to the desired performance, the instrumentality of the performance needed to achieve a specific result, and the value that the person places on the outcome valence (Bateman et al., 2019; Burton et al., 2020; Vroom, 1964).

According to Bateman et al. (2019) and Vroom (1964), a lack of motivation exists in the following three ways:

- 1) The belief a person has that they cannot perform well enough to achieve the desired outcomes. This belief is high in valence and instrumentality but low in expectancy.

- 2) The person knows that they can do the task with a fair amount of certainty of the outcome, but either does not want the outcome or chooses to believe others. This is high in expectancy and instrumentality and low in valence.
- 3) The person knows that they can do the task and wants several outcomes, but they also believe that no matter how well they perform the task, the outcome will not come. This is high in expectancy and positive valence but low in instrumentality.

The framework tied to this theory has helped guide the development of the problem statement, purpose statement, and research questions, as it aligns well with business, management, leadership, entrepreneurship, and even instruction. The idea of being motivated to continue training in martial arts or fitness aligns with the instructional format of traditional martial arts, which focuses on advancing rank (Minosky & Dumoulin, 2023; Reis Da Silva Duarte et al., 2022). Even combat sports focus on advancement, as one can progress from novice to intermediate to professional status (Andreato et al., 2022; Bernick, 2021; Boguszewski, 2019; Correia & Franchini, 2010; Lewandowski, 2020).

Introduction to Research Methodology and Design (Nature of the Study)

A qualitative narrative study using semi-structured one-on-one interviews was used to investigate the motivations of beginning martial arts students. The interview questions were structured and included a predetermined number of open-ended questions for every participant. This helped document what compels them to continue their training or leave shortly after they begin.

The study employed a qualitative methodology and involved a thorough examination of student enrollment in martial arts schools, which are experiencing extensive growth yet have received very little research attention regarding recruitment and retention. According to Creswell

and Poth (2024), qualitative data are often rich and subjective, consisting of in-depth information typically presented in writing. Textual data from the study can take various forms, including interview transcripts, diary entries, and observational notes (Creswell & Poth, 2024).

This exploratory narrative study aimed to investigate why people prematurely end their martial arts training and which factors contribute to their retention. Using inductive strategies helped analyze the data from the *bottom up*. This enabled data analysis without the bias of preconceived notions and identifying any themes that may be present (Fariba, 2016). One-on-one interviews were conducted in the study to encourage open-ended responses, thereby enhancing the validity and depth of the findings. When possible, a recording device was used to transcribe the received data, all while taking notes to ensure that nothing vital was missed. NVivo® qualitative analysis software was also used to analyze the answers, identify themes, and for coding. The dissertation board reviewed and approved all these tasks.

Research Questions

The research questions were designed to explore why beginning martial arts students often quit shortly after they begin training and what motivations exist among the student clientele. The following questions were used for the study:

|RQ1|

How do former martial arts students perceive the barriers to retention in beginner-level martial arts training?

|RQ2|

What are the perceptions of former martial arts students regarding the role of motivation in sustaining their engagement in martial arts training?

|RQ3|

How do former martial arts students perceive the influence of their engagement on their decision to drop out or continue martial arts training?

|RQ4|

What strategies and supports do former martial arts students perceive as necessary for maintaining long-term engagement and reducing dropout rates in martial arts training?

Significance of the Study

The particular significance of this study lies in increasing and maintaining client retention in martial arts, combat sports, and the broader field of fitness. A high level of client retention is necessary because existing customers can provide stability during times of financial need (Rodolfo de Azevedo Raiol, 2020; Xu et al., 2023). Customer retention is crucial to any successful business, as it focuses on maintaining long-term relationships with existing clientele. The ability to retain customers is often more cost-effective than acquiring new ones, and it can lead to higher profitability, increased customer loyalty, positive customer referrals, and a positive brand image (RevenueHunt, 2024; Rodolfo de Azevedo Raiol, 2020).

The number of martial arts facilities, MMA gyms, kickboxing gyms, sports combat gyms, and fitness centers has grown worldwide, leading to intense market competition. Therefore, maintaining a steady clientele is crucial (Rodolfo de Azevedo Raiol, 2020). According to Rodolfo de Azevedo Raiol (2020), the first step in preventing client drop-off is to identify the main periods when the most significant number of current clientele stop attending the gym. Little research exists on successful or unsuccessful teaching/learning experiences and systematic reviews (Reis Da Silva Duarte et al., 2022; Silva & Quaresma, 2019). Although fitness clubs are among the largest exercise arenas worldwide, membership dropout rates are generally between

40% and 65% within the first 6 months (Gjestvang, 2020; Glestvang et al., 2023). Since studying martial arts and combat sports encompasses a wide range of teaching concepts, theories, and techniques, it is essential to understand what a student can expect in any given session. A generalizable classification system of experiences across various martial schools and disciplines could be beneficial for linking experiences to specific outcomes. This would enable various teaching practices to be tailored to the specific needs, desires, experiences, expectations, and outcomes of individual students (Glestvang et al., 2023; Sanford & Gill, 2019).

Definitions of Key Terms

Best Practices

Best practice in business refers to identifying and using the most effective methods to achieve one's business objectives. This involves keeping up to date with how a successful business operates and measuring these practices against those used by market leaders across their own and other sectors (Dees et al., 2023; Fried & Kastel, 2021; Gleddie, 2019).

Buyer Motivation

Buyer motivation is the psychological factor connected to a consumer's decision to make a specific purchase. This process consists of three stages, known as the "Buyer's Journey," which includes awareness, consideration, and decision (Aicher et al., 2020; Fried & Kastel, 2021).

Combat Sports

Combat sports are sports in which psychological aspects greatly influence performance. They can be understood as the practice of martial arts and fighting in a sporting context, in which the practitioner(s) are concerned with winning. Combat sports are governed by pre-established rules implemented by regulatory organizations, such as confederations, federations, or leagues

(Andreato et al., 2022; Bernick, 2021; Boguszewski, 2019; Correia & Franchini, 2010; Lewandowski, 2020).

Consumer

In business, a consumer refers to an individual or group that uses a product or service for their own personal or business needs. The words "consumer" and "customer" are often used interchangeably. Regarding the supply chain, the consumer is the end user, making them important to the business as they drive revenue (Fried & Kastel, 2021; Richards, 2023; Xu, 2023).

Consumer/Buyer Behavior

Individuals, groups, or organizations, along with the processes they use to select, secure, utilize, and dispose of products, experiences, ideas, or services to meet their individual needs (Aicher et al., 2020; Garcia-Pascual et al., 2023; Richards, 2023; Rizvandi et al., 2019).

Cultural Approach

Culture includes the learned beliefs, values, and customs that direct the consumer behavior of members of a specific society. This approach takes a humanistic perspective on a cultural organization, considering the values, artifacts, and assumptions that arise from its members' interactions. It is a humanistic approach focused on a company's stakeholders (Aicher et al., 2020; Cornwell, 2022; Evans et al., 2022).

Customer Purchase Motivation

This is what encourages, leads, or motivates a consumer to make a purchase. It refers to the underlying reasons or factors that drive a customer to make a purchase, including both emotional and rational desires, such as the need to solve a problem, achieve a personal goal, experience a certain feeling, or derive utility from a product or service. Customer purchase

motivation refers to the factors that drive them to make a purchase. (Aicher et al., 2020; Fried & Kastel, 2021).

Customer Retention

Customer retention is a key aspect of relationship marketing and is closely tied to the philosophical process. This includes the service's total quality, as post-marketing activities play a crucial role in fostering customer loyalty on both external and internal levels (Rodolfo de Azevedo Raiol, 2020; Macon, 2020; McDonald et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2022).

Customer Service

When people are treated fairly, equally, and properly (Fried & Kastel, 2021; Happ et al., 2021; Huang & Kim, 2023).

Didactic-Pedagogical Errors

Didactic teaching is a teacher-centered method in which teachers directly instruct students through planned lessons and lectures. Pedagogy is learner-centered and involves developing teaching strategies that cater to the diverse ways in which students learn. Errors may develop within these teaching methods (Reis Da Silva Duarte, 2022; Schweisfurth, 2022).

Humanistic Approach

An approach to teaching in which the instructor allows students to learn of their own free will and desire for knowledge. Humanists believe that the desire to learn is innate, with an aim directed toward the ultimate goal of self-actualization; therefore, the motivation must come from the learner (Drzajic & Kolev, 2018; Gandhi & Mukherji, 2024; VaezMousavi, 2023; Zulkarnain, 2020).

Martial Arts

The definition of martial arts is not universally accepted, as it often encompasses various factors such as time, philosophy, place, worldviews, politics, and cross-cultural influences. Martial arts are fighting systems typically developed in Asia as ancient forms of combat and self-defense, often taught today as regular fitness activities. The practice of martial arts includes training in multiple disciplines/fighting styles such as hapkido, karate, aikido, taekwondo, kung fu, Taichi, judo, jujitsu, and many others (Boguszewski, 2019; Demilkhanova, 2024; Mataruna-Dos-Santos, 2020; McNamara, 2008; Sanford et al., 2021; Thomas, 2017; Werner, 2021). As a cultural and historical expression of humanity, martial arts are presented in different contexts as a physical practice of human movement, ranging from inception to high-performance sport, while also serving as an activity focused on health and self-defense (Baiao Junior et al., 2024).

Motivation

Forces that are both internal and external, which direct, energize, and sustain a person's efforts. These include all behaviors except involuntary reflexes, such as eye blinking. Motivation is intrinsic to the individual, referring to what moves a person toward action (Bateman et al., 2019; Burton et al., 2020; Fried & Kastel, 2021). Motivation is the processes that set in motion and strengthens goal-directed activities. Motivational processes are personal and internal influences that lead to outcomes such as effort, achievement, choice, and environmental regulations (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020).

Motivation is divided into intrinsic (IM) and extrinsic (EM). IM is related to the internal rewards detected within the brain's inherent satisfactions. It enables the acquisition of learning skills and complex behaviors that involve long chains of actions to regulate needs. EM is directly

related to external rewards, affecting the equilibrium state that guides behavioral learning (Berto et al., 2023; Houghton et al., 2024).

Stakeholders

People or institutions who have an effect on or are affected by a business. These may include shareholders, customers or clients, and local community members (Bateman et al., 2019; Fried & Kastel, 2021; Horbel, 2021).

Systematic Approach

“Systematic” implies that attention is being paid to the details of the teaching process, and the instructional approach will usually be teacher-directed (Gioia, 2021; Hemenstall, 2016; Plourde & Krueger, 2021).

Summary

A qualitative, narrative inquiry was employed to investigate why beginning martial arts students frequently discontinue their training shortly after commencing. This initiative was conducted at martial arts locations throughout Bartlesville and Washington County, Oklahoma, as well as in other areas across the United States, utilizing social media platforms. The study explored buyer motivations among the student clientele, including their expectations and desired outcomes. Purposive sampling was used to accurately represent the target population, including stakeholders ranging from beginning to advanced student clientele who have chosen to discontinue their studies. Three questions were used to develop semi-structured one-on-one interviews with a qualitative design, which were conducted in a private setting until thematic saturation was achieved (Naeem, 2024). The data collected from the interviews were then categorized and analyzed using NVivo® data analysis software.

Results from the study may then be used to identify the internal and external motivations of clients in martial arts, combat sports, and fitness settings and shared with instructors and business owners to implement the proper strategies needed to meet market demand and improve client retention rates. While many researchers have focused on the motivation to participate in martial arts/combat sports training or the benefits received from the training (Chung et al., 2022; Kim & Zhang, 2019; Kim et al., 2009; Ko & Kim, 2010; Thomas, 2017), studies regarding student retention rates within the martial arts industry are almost non-existent (Biscaia et al., 2021; Silva & Quaresma, 2019). The findings from this study will be presented as data to inform the formulation of best-practice strategies for attracting and retaining customers in an ever-changing competitive market (Thomas, 2017).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to explore the perceptions of former martial arts students regarding barriers to retention and identify the strategies and supports that would have promoted sustained engagement and motivation in their martial arts training. This is due to the underlying problem being the lack of effective strategies needed to aid in formulating beginning martial arts student engagement and motivation, which results in low retention and high dropout rates, thus threatening the long-term educational benefits training may provide (Biscaia et al., 2021; Cynarski, 2019; Kim & Zhang, 2019; Ko & Kim, 2010; Silva & Quaresma, 2019). There is an urgent need to address the high dropout rate that hinders the long-term educational benefits of martial arts training due to a lack of understanding of best practices for promoting student retention among beginning martial arts students (Barbopoulos & Johansson, 2016; Chung et al., 2022; Kim & Zhang, 2019; Nuñez-Barriopedro et al., 2021). Due to the primary source of revenue for martial arts facilities being student membership, having a basic understanding of the motivation of the buyer(s) will help in improving the product while aiding in attracting and retaining customers (Barbopoulos & Johansson, 2016; Biscaia et al., 2021; Chung et al., 2022; Kim & Zhang, 2019; Kim et al., 2009). This study aimed to provide a better understanding of the motivational mechanisms that drive adherence and retention in martial arts practice and study. The literature on the motivational mechanisms underlying adherence and retention in martial arts practice and study is limited (Barbopoulos & Johansson, 2016; Biscaia et al., 2021; Kim & Zhang, 2019; Reis Da Silva Duarte et al., 2022; Silva & Quaresma, 2019). This study aimed to bridge the gaps between buyer motivation, adherence, and retention in martial

arts practice and study by focusing on the satisfaction, expectations, and retention rates of client/student participants at a martial arts, sports, or fitness-based facility.

Several theories on the motivations that lead individuals to practice martial arts have existed for years, including perceived value and overall satisfaction (Biscaia et al., 2021). People may also study martial arts for personal obligations, well-being, competence, and enjoyment (Box et al., 2019; Chung et al., 2022; Deelan et al., 2018). These areas of interest may help students understand their motivations and enable instructors to adapt to and remain relevant in an ever-growing and competitive business environment by creating educational practices that appeal to them (Thomas, 2017).

This chapter examines strategies to overcome the barriers that prevent beginning martial artists from earning the rank of black belt and beyond, as well as the resources and support available to support retention. This discussion follows an examination of theories on educational practices and their application in martial arts instruction to enhance retention. The theory used in this study is Victor Vroom's 1964 expectancy theory (ET), also known as the expectancy theory of motivation. This chapter explains how other theories, such as Kurt Lewin's field theory, equity theory, and needs theory, influenced Vroom's expectancy theory.

Literature Search Strategies

This literature review focused on identifying sources from various search engines that included the most recent peer-reviewed journals relevant to this research study. Accessing the most prevalent peer-reviewed articles published within the past five years, up to 2024, required searching several databases using multiple search engines. These various search engines operate by extracting both older and recent articles. Scholarly articles were obtained from the following sources: Google Scholar, Google, ProQuest Central, *Journal of Business Strategies*, *Martial*

Arts Studies, Psychology of Sports & Exercise, Journal of Consumer Marketing, Physician & Sports Medicine, European Sport Management Quarterly, Iranian Journal of Public Health, Heliyon, ACPES Journal of Physical Education, Sport, and Health (AJPESH), Motriz, The Lykeion Library series, PLoS ONE, Journal of the Society for Existential Analysis, Philosophical Alternatives Journal, Front Sports Act Living, International Journal for Quality Research, Sport in Society, The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, Scandinavian Journal of Medicine & Science in Sports, Journal of Physical Education, Recreation, & Dance, Journal of Sports Science & Medicine, International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship, Journal of Physical Fitness and Sports Medicine, The Centre for Independent Studies, Sustainability, International Journal of Applied Sports Sciences, Sports Management Review, Journal of the Philosophy of Sport, Waldon University – Scholar Works, Journal of Service Management, Frontiers of Psychology, International Journal of Qualitative Methods, R&E Search for Evidence, Scientific Electronic Archives, Journal of Human Sport and Exercise, Revista Intercontinental de Gestao Desportiva, Journal of Sports Behavior, Physical Education & Sport Pedagogy, International Journal of Educational Development, Revista de Artes Marciales Asiaticas, International Journal of Human Movement and Sports Sciences, International Journal of Marketing Studies, Positive Psychology, National Olympic Academy – HSAS, European Journal of Neuroscience, Journal of Physical Education and Sports, and Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research.

The National University online library, RoadRunner Navigator Search, was the most valuable resource for finding journal articles for this research. Some of the keywords and search terms used for the research were as follows: martial arts theories of retention, challenges of education, customer acquisition and retention in sports, the importance of client retention in

sports, the definition of best practices, martial arts terms and history, martial arts statistics, buyer motivation in sports, buyer motivation in martial arts, customer retention, customer retention in martial arts and/or sports, humanistic approach to teaching, Vroom's expectancy theory, expectancy theory of motivation, VIE theory, Kurt Lewin's field theory, Adam's equity theory of motivation, Bandura's cognitive theory of motivation, and Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used in this study was Victor Vroom's 1964 expectancy theory (ET), also known as the expectancy theory of motivation, and the VIE theory, which is based on its three core components: valence, instrumentality, and expectancy (Riggio, 2015). Expectancy theory differs from the content needs theories of Alderfer, McClelland, Herzberg, and Maslow in that it does not provide specific suggestions on what motivates members of an organization (Lunenburg, 2011; Render, 2019). This means that expectancy theory is a cognitive process theory of motivation, in which people are motivated if they believe that solid effort will lead to good performance (Bryant, 2020; Lunenburg, 2011; Vroom, 1964). It differs from other main motivational theories in its unique focus on cognitive antecedents that shape personal motivation (Bryant, 2020; Lunenburg, 2011; Render, 2019).

The theory suggests that in terms of education, a student's motivation is mainly driven by their belief that their effort will lead to a desired outcome, such as positive feedback and good grades, and that the value that is placed on the outcome will have a direct impact on the amount of effort that they put forth, meaning that students have more motivation when they believe that their hard work will result in a meaningful reward that they desire (Lunenburg, 2011; Vroom & Deci, 1999; World of Work, 2019; Zadjia, 2023). Blaise Pascal and David Bernoulli formulated the basic idea that an action should be executed if its expected results are high in value and the

action appears to be a feasible means of realizing them in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Cranach & Tschan, 2001; Sutton, 2024). However, the theory's psychological formulations are based on Kurt Lewin's 1951 field theory, with subsequent developments by John W. Atkinson, Heinz Heckhausen, and others (Cranach & Tschan, 2001; Sutton, 2024; Zadjia, 2023).

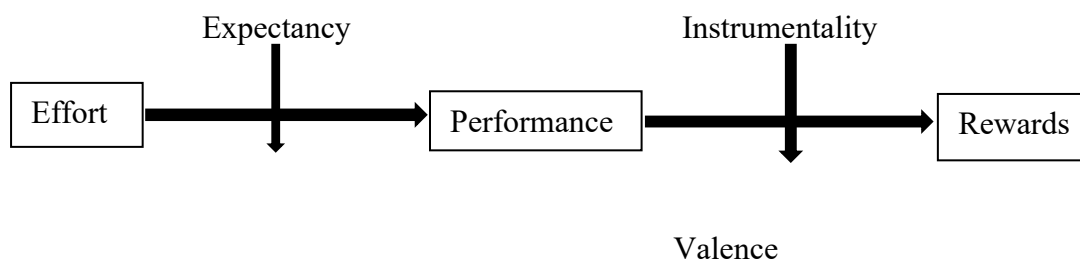
Victor Vroom was a Canadian psychologist who developed the expectancy theory in 1964 while working at the Yale School of Management. This theory has since gained significant prominence in the field and study of workplace motivation (Sutton, 2024; Zadjia, 2023). In 1964, Vroom suggested that an "individual's behavior was motivated by anticipated results or consequences" and that the intensity of their work was driven by the perception that their effort would result in a desired outcome (as cited in Zadjia, 2023, p. 38). This way of thinking aligns with behavioral theories as it recognizes the importance of consequences in motivating our actions. Vroom also claimed that we are more driven to perform when we know (or at least believe) that the extra effort we put forth will be noticed and rewarded accordingly (Zadjia, 2023).

Expectancy theory is based on four assumptions (Lunenburg, 2011; Render, 2019; Vroom, 1964; Vroom & Deci, 1999). These assumptions can be attributed to martial arts schools as follows: people join martial arts schools with expectations based on three things that influence how individuals react to the school: their needs, motivations, and past experiences; conscious choice leads to an individual's behavior, meaning people are free to choose those behaviors suggested by their expectancy calculations; people desire different things from the organization, such as job security, good competitive wages, etc.; and people will choose among various alternatives to optimize outcomes for them personally. It is these four assumptions of the

theory that lead to three key elements (Bateman et al., 2019; Vroom, 1964), which are *expectancy* – a person is motivated to the degree that they believe that effort will lead to acceptable performance; *instrumentality* - a person is motivated to the degree that they believe their good performance will be rewarded; and *valence* – a person is motivated to the degree that they believe the value of the rewards is highly positive (Bateman et al., 2019; Vroom, 1964; World of Work, 2019). This is illustrated by how one assumption leads to an element in Figure 1, the *Basic Expectancy Model* that I created.

Figure 1

Basic Expectancy Model



Note. This figure illustrates that a person is motivated to the point of believing that maximum effort will lead to acceptable performance (expectancy). In martial arts, achieving good performance may lead to promotion from one rank to the next. Second, adequate performance will lead to the desired rewards (instrumentality), including an increase in rank, greater recognition from peers of lower rank, and additional responsibility. Third, the value of rewards is highly positive (valence); the possibility of rewards may make students more inclined to try harder. The figure is based on my understanding of how the assumptions and key elements are related (Bateman et al., 2019; Lunenburg, 2011; Render, 2019; Vroom, 1964; Vroom & Deci, 1999; World of Work, 2019).

Expectancy

Expectancy is a person's estimate of the likelihood that their effort will yield acceptable performance. It is the extent to which they believe their additional effort will help them achieve the target behavioral outcomes. It is based on probabilities that range from 0 to 1. Zero is when a person believes there is no chance that their effort will lead to the desired performance level. The opposite of this is 1, in which the person is optimistic that the task will be completed (Bateman et al., 2019; Boyd & Hartzell, 2023; Griffin, 2023; Lunenburg, 2011; Vroom, 1964; Vroom & Deci, 1999).

Instrumentality

Instrumentality is one's estimate of the probability that a given level of achieved task performance will be rewarded. It is the extent to which they believe the rewards will actually materialize if they achieve the desired outcomes or behaviors (Alston et al., 2017; Boyd & Hartzell, 2023; Griffin, 2023; Vroom, 1964; Vroom & Deci, 1999). Instrumentality refers to a person's belief that first-level goals are a precursor to second-level goals (Bryant, 2020). This also ranges from 0 to 1. An example of 0 instrumentality would be a situation in which there is no perceived relationship between a good performance rating and promotion to a new belt level in martial arts. An instrumentality rating of 1 occurs when a martial arts student recognizes that their excellent technique performance will result in a promotion to a new belt level (Bateman et al., 2019; Lunenburg, 2011).

Valence

Valence is the strength of one's preference for a specific reward. It is the extent to which they value the potential rewards associated with particular results or behaviors (Griffin, 2023). It means that peer acceptance, recognition by instructors, belt or rank promotions, or any other

reward may hold value for one martial arts student and no value for another. Valence can be positive or negative, unlike expectancy and instrumentality. The valence range is -1 to +1. Therefore, if a student sees no value in a reward, the valence is negative; whereas if they see little to no value, the valence is 0. In theory, a reward has valence because it relates to the person's needs. This means that valence links to the need theories of motivation developed by Alderfer, McClelland, Herzberg, and Maslow. These psychologists all developed their own versions of needs theory, which aim to explain how people's underlying needs influence their motivation. Each theorist identified the specific kinds of needs that drive people's actions and behaviors in a variety of ways, such as Alderfer's ERG theory, McClelland's need for affiliation, achievement, and power, Herzberg's hygiene and motivator factors, and Maslow's hierarchy of needs (McClelland & Boyatzis, 1982; Souders, 2019).

Vroom suggested that motivation and the three elements of expectancy, instrumentality, and valence are related through the following equation: $\text{Motivation} = \text{Expectancy} \times \text{Instrumentality} \times \text{Valence}$. The equation is significant because it has a multiplier effect: when expectancy, instrumentality, and valence are all high, motivation is also high; however, if any one of these factors is missing, motivation may be compromised. The opposite of this assumption of the theory implies that if any of the three factors is zero, the overall level of motivation will be zero (Bateman et al., 2019; Boyd & Hartzell, 2023; Bryant, 2020; Lunenburg, 2011; Render, 2019; Vroom, 1964; Vroom & Deci, 1999; World of Work, 2019).

According to Petri and Govern (2004), motivation is a term that describes "the forces acting on or within an organism to initiate or direct behavior" (p. 16). If this is the case, one could argue that a person's knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and differing definitions and perceptions can affect their motivation to continue martial arts instruction. This makes

motivation a complex process focused on a specified behavior that can be influenced by various factors, including a person's feelings, beliefs, values, and context (Alston et al., 2017).

It is essential to recognize that rewards arising from motivation can be intrinsic or extrinsic. In martial arts instruction, extrinsic motivations are external, such as the desire for promotion, whereas intrinsic motivations are internal, including a sense of fulfillment and the achievement of earning a new belt or rank (Daniels, 2024; Denomine & Hartzell, 2023; Vroom, 1964; Vroom & Deci, 1999). It is said that a person is intrinsically motivated when engaged in an activity because they enjoy it rather than for external rewards. Intrinsic motivation may be intensified or diminished by the presence or absence of certain factors, such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Students struggle to grasp the complexity of sustaining intrinsic motivation (Kang, 2021; Singhal, 2022). In education, people may believe that the likelihood of achieving a desired outcome is higher, even if they perform at the required level, leading to poor motivation. Others may also decide that the likelihood of achieving their goal is not so bad, which can result in strong motivation (Riggio, 2015; Sutton, 2024).

At least seven key points concern expectancy theory, including: the individual's perception is central. The theory emphasizes that people's motivation is based on their personal perception of the relationship between their performance, effort, and the outcomes that follow (Boyd & Hartzell, 2023; Glaser, 2023; Lunenburg, 2011; Sutton, 2024; Zadjia, 2023). Second, the motivational force calculation, as mentioned previously, suggests that an individual's motivation level is a product of $\text{Motivation} = \text{Expectancy} \times \text{Instrumentality} \times \text{Valence}$ (Bateman et al., 2019; Bryant, 2020; Lunenburg, 2011; Vroom, 1964; Vroom & Deci, 1999). Third, application in management, which suggests that managers can use expectancy theory to design incentive systems successfully, thus ensuring that their employees believe that their efforts will be

recognized and that their performance will be rewarded appropriately (Boyd & Hartzell, 2023; Lunenburg, 2011; Sutton, 2024; Zadjia, 2023). This may also be applied to martial arts instruction and students being rewarded through belt promotions and an increase in rank due to their performance and proper demonstration of knowledge (Biscaia et al., 2021; Chung et al., 2022; Minosky & Dumoulin, 2023; Reis Da Silva Duarte et al., 2022; Sanford & Gill, 2019; Thomas, 2017). Fourth is individual decision-making, as the theory assumes that people actively choose behaviors based on their assessment of the possible outcomes and their perceived likelihood of achieving them (Glaser, 2023; Lunenburg, 2011; Sutton, 2024; Zadjia, 2023). The fifth key point is cognitive appraisal: the theory assumes that people actively assess the potential rewards and costs of various actions, taking into account their personal values and beliefs. This is done by emphasizing the role of a person's subjective evaluation of their capabilities and the environment in determining their motivation (Sutton, 2024). A sixth key point is individual differences, as the theory acknowledges that people differ in their levels of expectancy, instrumentality, and valence, which depend on their personal experiences, values, and goals (Sutton, 2024). Finally, there is the choice theory, which, like expectancy theory, emphasizes that people choose behavior based on their perceptions of what will lead to the most desirable outcome, aligning with the core premise behind choice theory (Sutton, 2024).

Several theorists, including Peak (1955) and Porter and Lawler (1968), have contributed to Vroom's expectancy theory over the years since its creation. Peak's concept of instrumentality has been used to complement Vroom's expectancy construct. Instrumentality theory describes the individual's point of view regarding the relationship between the expected byproducts of action needed to achieve a goal and the achievement of the outcome. Porter and Lawler then expanded on expectancy theory by suggesting that performance results from the interaction

between expectancy, instrumentality, valence, ability, and role perceptions, thereby bridging the two theories. Porter and Lawler defined role perceptions as the actions believed necessary to perform a job successfully (Bryant, 2020).

Other theories used to create Victor Vroom's expectancy theory were Kurt Lewin's 1951 field theory, Adam's 1965 equity theory of motivation, Bandura's 1960s cognitive theory of motivation, Maslow's Hierarchy of Need (Need-based theories), and Skinner's reinforcement theory (Chanel, 2021; Lunenburg, 2011; Souders, 2019; Sutton, 2024; Zadjia, 2023). Each model has a significant place in education and makes a substantial contribution to Vroom's expectancy theory. Understanding the other behavioral models and how they operate is essential to a better comprehension of how expectancy theory works.

Kurt Lewin's 1951 *field theory* is considered the foundational concept behind Victor Vroom's 1964 expectancy theory due to its emphasis on the idea that a person's behavior is influenced by the complex interplay of forces within their "life space" (i.e., their perceptions (internal psychological space) and environment (external physical space)) (Jones, 2024; Qi, 2021; Talwar, 2021). Its perspective enables educators to approach teaching by addressing the entire learning environment, thereby positively facilitating change and student development (Cherry, 2023; Qi, 2021; Rama, 2023). Lewin used the term 'group' to refer to a set of actors who depend on one another to achieve specific goals, and in martial arts, that may mean earning a black belt (as cited in Kump, 2023). According to the Encyclopedia Britannica (2024), Lewin stated that behavior is a function of a person's environment and that everything in one's environment affects behavior. This environment can be found in various settings, including martial arts schools, workplaces, and homes. In certain settings, the environment can lead people to become compliant, be promoted, or even quit their jobs (McGee, 1995; World of Work, 2024).

There is a valuable link between Vroom's expectancy theory and Adam's *equity theory of motivation*. The two theories suggest that people will also compare their outcomes with those of others based on their perceptions (Souders, 2019). Equity theory is rooted in social exchange theory (Davlembayeva & Alamanos, 2023; Littlejohn et al., 2021). It suggests that those who perceive themselves as under- or over-rewarded will experience suffering, leading them to seek to restore equity within the relationship (Adams, 1965; World of Work, 2020). According to Adam's 1965 equity theory of motivation, people strive for fairness or equity in their social interactions. Regarding education, they aim to recognize that the effort they put into their degrees is reflected in the benefits they receive (Reyes & Zhang, 2024). This principle can also be applied to martial arts instruction; those who invest effort into their training want to know that the time they spend will be worthwhile (Freitas & Lacerda, 2019). This means that a lack of clear evidence, which hinders informed choices, impacts a student's motivation (Adams, 1963, 1965). Martial arts achievements are often linked to a ranking system, generally associated with a colored belt award. The attainment of these belt ranks has been identified as having distinct personal significance, meaning that people will measure themselves against them. Hence, the belts measure their progress (Minosky & Dumoulin, 2023; Reis Da Silva Duarte et al., 2022; Sanford & Gill, 2019).

Vroom's expectancy theory of motivation is linked to Bandura's *social cognitive theory of motivation* through the concept of expectancy (Bandura, 1991; Riggio, 2015; Urhahne & Wijnia, 2023; Zajdo, 2023). Social Learning Theory has been successfully applied across various cultural settings and used to understand how new behaviors are learned in diverse domains, including leadership, athletics, and entrepreneurship (Morse et al., 2019). According to Nickerson (2024), Bandura's Social Learning Theory (SLT) has had a significant impact on teaching methods and

classroom management, and it can be applied to education in several ways. Instructors can use praise and reward systems to foster positive behaviors and promote learning. Regarding positive reinforcement, martial arts instructors are trained to encourage and support their students positively. This is done by providing constructive feedback, celebrating victories and milestone achievements such as belt promotions, and helping overcome obstacles. This helps individuals feel valued and seen, boosting their self-esteem and confidence (Bandura, 1991; Biscaia et al., 2021; Chung et al., 2022; Memarian & Doleck, 2024). The rewards may be given positively or negatively (Larriba-Quest, 2017; Younas et al., 2019). Minosky and Dumoulin (2023), Reis Da Silva Duarte et al. (2022), and Sanford and Gill (2019) have all discussed promotion in martial arts and rewarding student performance with an advancement in rank/level through the tradition of giving them a different-colored belt to show their advancement in training and increase in knowledge.

Maslow's *hierarchy of needs* can help us better understand the various rewards people might find valuable depending on their level of need satisfaction (Amron, 2017; Lunenburg, 2011; McLeod, 2024; Sutton, 2024). While Vroom's expectancy theory does not clearly define a hierarchy of needs, it acknowledges that different individuals may value different rewards based on their specific needs and goals. Therefore, it is similar to Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory (Souders, 2019). While expectancy theory has been shown to have been influenced by Maslow's needs theory, it is different in that it emphasizes that motivation is driven by the perceived value of the reward and the belief that effort will lead to the outcome (reward) whereas need-based theories focus on the fulfillment of basic needs (Chanel, 2021; Crandall et al., 2020; Freilandau & Levin, 2023; Papalia, 2024; Souders, 2019).

The variables of a research study are important as they are any attribute or characteristic that can be measured, examined, observed, described, and interpreted. They can take on various values within a study population, reflecting aspects of the subject under analysis to understand the relationships among the different factors (Andrade, 2021). They can be *independent variables*, which influence other variables (the cause), or *dependent variables*, which depend on other variables (the effect) (Andrade, 2021; Bhandari, 2023). An example in this study was the relationship between student retention and business growth (i.e., a martial arts studio's growth is dependent on student retention). This study addressed four research questions, each examining a different variable: barriers to retention in beginner-level martial arts training, the role of motivation in sustaining engagement, the relationship between engagement and the decision to continue training or drop out, and strategies to reduce dropout rates in martial arts schools. Variables are important because they enable the framing of research questions, the creation of hypotheses, and the interpretation of results (Stewart, 2025).

Barriers to Retention in Beginner-Level Martial Arts Training

Studies on barriers to retention in martial arts training are limited, with most articles focusing on other barriers, such as the cultural differences between the martial arts (Biscaia et al., 2021; Cynarski, 2021). The biggest issue with the availability of martial arts studios appears to occur primarily in rural areas. Interest in training is relatively low, about 17%, so retention is often even lower (Cynarski, 2021). In a study by Witkowski et al. (2021), the authors found that the barriers to training in martial arts, specifically combat sports, are related to physical conditions and poorly organized physical education classes, while the motives for training in martial arts are related to a higher level of combat skills as well as trends that the media have set. Another study found that approximately 21% of American adults have studied some form of

martial arts in their lifetime, with only 2.8% of those individuals still actively training, indicating a high turnover rate among new students (Gabelhouse, 2017; Guy, 2020).

Perceived barriers to physical activity and martial arts training, whether internal or external, can be seen as roadblocks to participation. Internal barriers relate to personal factors, such as preferences, whereas external barriers refer to the environment, including a martial arts school (Aggarwal, 2024; Koh et al., 2022). It is essential to recognize that, due to variations in populations, socio-economic status, and culture worldwide, barriers to physical activity and martial arts training may also differ. As a result, perceived barriers can influence both physical activity and sedentary behavior (Koh et al., 2022).

Retention in martial arts and combat sports is a crucial element of consumer behavior research, and the education and knowledge gained can be applied in practical business marketing situations. Trends in the fitness and martial arts industry are constantly changing and evolving, requiring business owners to stay informed about the business environment and to assess market demand to maintain and remain relevant in the field (Garcia-Fernandez et al., 2020; Thomas, 2017). Martial arts, combat sports, sports, and fitness organizations are unique when it comes to the environment of customer service, as many of them offer a product in which the customer has the option of being a consumer who chooses to be a spectator of a contest, a client who actively takes part in a sport or physical activity, or both. Student client participation is vital to the quality of what martial arts organizations offer, as students often assume multiple roles, including consumer and participant, with expectations of receiving something of value in return (Ruihley et al., 2020). These new paradigms and trends include systematic, humanistic, and cultural approaches, among others (Cynarski, 2019). The quality of training that a student seeks may not necessarily come from the equipment, style of training, or environment but rather the customer

service and rewards that are shown, given, and gained by the instructor(s) and the owner(s) of the facility thus making proper education on the wants and needs of the student vital to succeed (Garcia-Pascual, 2023; Ruihley et al., 2020).

Breaking down barriers in the martial arts is crucial for the entire industry, as it can help it grow and thrive by making training and learning more accessible to anyone with the desire to participate. When individuals from diverse backgrounds choose to train, they also bring new and exciting perspectives and a range of skills and talents. Additionally, by overcoming these barriers, the industry will be able to increase its training participation, support, and revenue, thereby becoming more vibrant and sustainable (Grow Pro, 2023; Guy, 2020).

Role of Motivation in Sustaining Engagement

Motivation plays a vital role in sustaining engagement in martial arts and sports participation. It serves as a driving force that encourages individuals to continue training, remain committed, and overcome barriers, thereby significantly impacting long-term participation and retention (Deckers, 2022; Ley, 2020; Polycarpou, 2023). These rewards come intrinsically or extrinsically. People who are intrinsically motivated participate in the task for internal reasons such as satisfaction and overall enjoyment (Almagro et al., 2020; Hatch et al., 2025; Malchrowicz-Mosko et al., 2020). Extrinsically motivated individuals may choose to train because they crave external rewards, such as trophies, praise, and recognition, and tend to focus on competitive and/or performance outcomes (Hatch et al., 2025; Malchrowicz-Mosko et al., 2020; Tlemsani, 2021).

According to Witkowski et al. (2021), the primary motives for training in martial arts among most people are excitement, body shaping, and comprehensive physical development, which often stem from watching their favorite action stars in movies and playing video games.

Other motives may be self-defense-oriented and focused on one's own safety. For some, this motivation may be strong from the moment they begin training in a martial art; for others, it may take time to develop, if at all. Regardless, if the person is motivated, retention will remain strong; however, when that motivation is lacking, it may lead to burnout and eventually to dropping out (Malchrowicz-Mosko et al., 2020; Polycarpou, 2023; Szakal, 2022).

Engagement and Choosing to Continue or Drop Out

According to Anderson-Butcher et al. (2022), research suggests that engagement in sport-based positive youth development programs leads to and contributes to key outcomes related to social, cognitive, physical, emotional, and mental health. Youth, especially those who are socially vulnerable, tend to derive the most benefits from consistent, long-lasting participation. However, even when common barriers are removed, retention remains a challenge. These barriers may include cost, time, lack of transportation, and other factors (Back et al., 2022a; Bantham et al., 2021; Malchrowicz-Mosko et al., 2020). This means that understanding the factors that influence retention and may lead to long-term participation among those groups that tend to be the hardest to serve is also a priority (Anderson-Butcher, 2022; Back et al., 2022b). So, understanding the barriers to retention and being able to keep the martial arts students motivated, engaged, and wanting to return to training in more classes is vital for maintaining the school and keeping the doors open (Almagro et al., 2020; Hatch et al., 2025; Mittermeir et al., 2024).

Reducing Dropout Rates

Dropout and retention rates are significant issues for martial arts and sports business management, as these businesses rely on customers to sustain consistent operations while competing with other businesses with similar business models in their area (Malchrowicz-

Mosko, 2020; Mittermeir et al., 2024). Martial arts schools not only need to be made available to the masses, but they also need to offer consistent opportunities to train while also giving the customer what they want, meeting the market demand of the customer, because when the customer is happy, they tend to stay (Kim et al., 2021; Kim & Zhang, 2019; Thomas, 2017). Having a better understanding of the client's wants and needs and how they come from all circumstances of life is of special importance as it will aid in overcoming those barriers to retention and may help to reduce the dropout rates (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2020; Anderson-Butcher et al., 2022; Back et al., 2022a).

Student Motivation in Martial Arts

Motivation, including training and striving for perfection, is one of many predictors of human performance. As a result, the lack of motivation in martial arts training and combat sports is a significant issue, a primary concern across various fields of science and business management, including sociology, physical education, and the psychology of sports and fitness management (Wolska et al., 2019). Motivation is one of the major issues in sports training as it determines not only the effectiveness of the training but also the desire to first and foremost begin training and then continue training (i.e., retention) (Malchrowicz-Mosko et al., 2020; Silva & Quaresma, 2019; Wafiroh et al., 2022; Wolska et al., 2019). According to Wolska et al. (2019), it is understandable that researchers have a vested interest in motivation related to sports participation and acknowledge that improving athletes' performance requires a variety of well-organized and appropriate motivational techniques. Unfortunately, research on martial arts and sports combat motivation is limited and often specific to a single discipline or style (Deckers, 2022; Silva & Quaresma, 2019).

Sports and martial arts training are intensive activities that cultivate and enhance athletes' abilities, enabling them to achieve specific goals. Achievement includes several important psychological factors, including motivation. Unfortunately, athletes, students, coaches, and instructors still do not consider these factors (Wolska et al., 2019). According to Yildirim et al. (2019), effective leadership techniques as an instructor are crucial behavioral processes that significantly impact several educational concepts, including motivation.

Previous studies have demonstrated that age and gender can influence sports motivation in various ways, encompassing both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Malcrowicz-Mosko et al., 2020). *Intrinsic motivation* is related to the internal rewards detected within the brain's inherent satisfactions. It enables the acquisition of learning skills and complex behaviors that involve long chains of actions to regulate needs. It refers to engaging in an activity for pleasure. *Extrinsic motivation* is directly related to external rewards, which influence the equilibrium state that guides behavior learning. Individuals experience less optimal levels of challenge or autonomy (Berto et al., 2023; Daniels, 2024; Denomine & Hartzell, 2023; Houghton et al., 2024; Malcrowicz-Mosko et al., 2020). People engage in physical activity for intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation, even though external factors may be used to enhance it at times (Malcrowicz-Mosko et al., 2020; Rosario, 2023). A higher level of extrinsic motivation was observed among men than among women in a social context; men tend to display a strong orientation toward achievement driven by external factors, such as recognition from others and prestige (Malcrowicz-Mosko et al., 2020; Walczak & Tomazak, 2019).

Student Retention in Martial Arts

Retention in martial arts refers to the progression of students from initially trying out and sampling the school to becoming fully engaged, committed students dedicated to the training

offered by the school (Berg et al., 2021). Failure to retain students may increase the cost of recruiting and training new clients for the sports and martial arts program. Retention may be challenging, but it often disregards organization within the process. Maintaining and increasing the number of clients requires a thorough investigation into what keeps them engaged and motivated to continue training. Most consideration must be given to specific perspectives that lead to an increased interest in continuing their martial arts education. A thorough analysis of what motivates individuals to stay and continue training is crucial for organizations to retain and expand their student numbers (Boborol et al., 2023).

In a study on sports participation by Eime et al. (2022), retention was lowest among four-year-olds, with the highest dropout rate. In this age group, 57% of children stopped participating in their chosen sport within 2 years of starting, and 36.4% continued playing for 3 years. The age group with the highest retention rate was 10–14 years, at 39.3%. The study also found that participation in community club-based sports had a significant dropout rate, with 45% of participants aged 4–29 quitting within 3 years. A Spanish study by San Emeterio et al. (2017) reported that the likelihood of quitting decreased with the amount of money invested. They also concluded that loyalty-building strategies, rewarding advance payments, and cross-selling can be practical tools for increasing retention.

Student Engagement in Martial Arts

A student who participates actively has a vested interest in their martial arts training and is motivated and engaged. Being engaged also includes practicing consistently, having a desire to learn new techniques, and feeling a sense of connection to their training and martial arts organization (Admin, 2024). Yu et al. (2024) found that when martial arts schools in China emphasize their cultural significance, it becomes a culturally engaging form of physical activity

for practitioners. The focus connected the students to their style's heritage and instilled a sense of pride and identity, thereby enhancing their motivation and desire to train. The structured environment of martial arts classes promotes a clear set of rules and expectations for the students while also supporting the development of self-regulation by providing a consistent framework for the students to be able to practice and perfect their skills (Baumeister et al., 2007; Henderson, 2022; Papalia, 2024; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). Madireddy et al. (2023) suggested that instructors should focus more on implementing a hands-on approach in their curricula to bridge the gap between theory and practice, making martial arts practice more engaging and applicable to students' real-life experiences. Tailoring the curriculum to students' varying skill levels and providing more inclusive opportunities may increase participation and interest in the training (Madireddy et al., 2023; Yu et al., 2024).

Student Drop-out Rates in Martial Arts

Dropout has two meanings: the first, when referring to elite sports participation, is that the athlete's career ends before they reach the peak of their athletic performance. This type of dropout tends to be more prevalent among children and adolescent athletes. The contrast to this interpretation is that ending a sports career after reaching peak performance is typically referred to as retirement. According to the first interpretation (Zhang et al., 2024), retired athletes are older than those who dropped out of the same sport. In short, dropout can occur at any age and is characterized by the premature termination of any supervised physical activity (Saez et al., 2021).

Preventing athlete dropout is one of the most significant challenges, especially among youth participants; therefore, it is essential to explore the factors contributing to the dropout rate. One of the primary strategies to reduce, and potentially prevent, early dropouts is to explore

methods and tools that keep athletes engaged in their chosen sport, including those used by martial arts practitioners (Zhang et al., 2024). Understanding the cause can involve various factors, including the quality of the motivational atmosphere created by the instructors and the strength of the relationship between the student and instructor(s) (Fang et al., 2024).

Several international studies have been published that offer valuable insights into why people participate in sports and the importance of sports; however, far fewer examine why young people drop out of sports. According to Hundito (2022), 33% of youth ages 10–17 drop out of organized sports each year, affecting millions worldwide. Sports such as martial arts, which require extensive training, high levels of endurance, and/or specialized skills, may also lead to higher dropout rates (Brenner et al., 2019).

Several factors have been shown to influence one's decision to continue training or drop out, including personality, motivation and commitment, learning and development, and health. A person's *personality* can majorly affect sports-related behavior and achievement. Because of this, it is no surprise that most research has focused on dropout as an outcome variable related to personality. The discernment of success was also found to be a possible factor influencing the dropout rate (Zhang et al., 2024). Positive emotion-related variables, such as enjoyment, openness, and satisfaction with the chosen sport's practice, may also serve as a protective factor against dropout (Calvo & Topa, 2019; Lea & Branco, 2020; Zhang et al., 2024).

Motivation and commitment were the next factors to be identified, encompassing intrinsic, extrinsic, and overall motivation (Calvo & Topa, 2019; Malcrowicz-Mosko et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2024). Body-related motivation was one specific outcome investigated as a plausible factor affecting persistence. Commitment was also proven to be a protective factor regarding dropout (Zhang et al., 2024).

Learning and development are also crucial for long-lasting participation in sports. These include a variety of learning strategies, particularly affective, motivational, and cognitive-metacognitive (Conson et al., 2021). These strategies include positive feedback, the athlete's chosen pursuit of learning, and the athlete's pursuit of comparison, all of which can be seen as protective factors against dropout (Zhang et al., 2024).

Finally, the relevance of *health* was found. Concerns about health and physical health complaints were identified as possible variables that significantly influence dropout rates, particularly the anticipation of someone dropping out of a sports activity. Therefore, poor health and injuries can increase the likelihood of someone dropping out (Zhang et al., 2024).

Classification of Martial Arts Styles

The definition of martial arts is not universally accepted, as it often encompasses various factors such as time, philosophy, place, worldviews, politics, and cross-cultural influences. Martial arts are fighting systems typically developed in Asia as ancient forms of combat and self-defense, often taught today as regular fitness activities. The practice of martial arts includes training in multiple disciplines/fighting styles such as hapkido, karate, aikido, taekwondo, kung fu, Taichi, judo, jujitsu, and many others (Boguszewski, 2019; Demilkhanova, 2024; Mataruna-Dos-Santos, 2020; McNamara, 2008; Piepiora et al., 2024; Sanford et al., 2021; Thomas, 2017; Werner, 2021). As a cultural and historical expression of humanity, martial arts are presented in different contexts as a physical practice of human movement, ranging from inception to high-performance sport, while also serving as an activity focused on health and self-defense (Baiao Junior et al., 2024).

The practice of martial arts training has grown in popularity among children and adolescents in the United States, increasing by 31% from 2010 to 2024, resulting in

approximately 6.6 million participants (Statista Research Department, 2024). Over the years, martial arts and sports have been the subject of research stemming from various scientific disciplines. These studies have since provided a significant amount of valuable information, including the health benefits of martial arts and sports training, their position in social and media discourse, their role in both traditional and mass culture, and their potential and tangible impact on the social attitudes of children and adolescents from a variety of cultural areas (Pawelee, 2020).

A wide variety of research on both sports and martial arts allows for research that is specialized and specific to a variety of research areas, such as education, historical issues, cultural contexts, issues of using martial arts in law enforcement and military dimensions, media content regarding the subject matter that is indicated, theories on the physical education, religion, philosophy, and science behind the training. For this reason, the treatment of martial arts and combat sports is promoted in an integrative perspective to varying degrees across almost every field of science (Cynarski, 2012; Cynarski, 2016; Pawelee, 2020). This encompasses all scientific publications that cite the elements listed above as topical sources of interest sought by many researchers (Pawelee, 2020).

According to Pedrini and Jennings (2021), martial arts and combat sports are systems of integrated movements with underlying pedagogical and philosophical frameworks. Both have intrinsic complexities that can improve a person's well-being, reshape the practitioner's life, and hinder the pursuit of a long-lasting, healthy lifestyle. Conversely, martial arts and combat sports exercises may help individuals become fitter, defend themselves, develop specific personal and cultural values, and feel more relaxed (Jennings, 2019; Miller, 2023). However, Pedrini and Jennings (2021) argue that many practices may be misguided, risky, and outdated, including

exercises and drills that are incompatible with a healthy, sustainable lifestyle. Considering theory as central to any discipline has necessitated a central role for theorizing in the study of martial arts, and this further perspective can play a significant role in health-related studies (Bowman, 2017; Pedrini & Jennings, 2021).

According to Harris (2021), when martial arts training is conducted correctly, it can also promote social acceptance, as the training can be tailored to focus on the practitioner's individual needs, physical abilities, and mental capacities. As a result, martial arts instructors may be able to challenge traditional views on acceptance and revise beliefs about competence-based proficiency. This may lead to a sociology of acceptance, allowing instructors to choose and modify the specific style to include different populations. This classification categorizes martial arts into internal and external, traditional and modern, combat sports and sports, and striking and grappling styles (Bowman, 2021; Harris, 2021).

Internal Styles vs External Styles

Internal or soft styles often focus on the practitioner's spiritual, mental, and internal power. Those who choose to study such styles use circular movement techniques and redirect the attacker's force as the main principles of self-defense. The chosen method of self-defense movement utilizes leverage and redirection rather than forcing them to attack and defend. Therefore, in internal styles, strength and force are not necessary for effectiveness; rather, technique and proper body mechanics are crucial (Bowman, 2021; Cynarski, 2019; Harris, 2021; Jennings, 2019). Such characteristics often lead to the assumption that internal/soft styles are more suitable and recommended for the elderly, individuals with specific health conditions and concerns, and those who do not wish to focus on physical strength training (Harris, 2021).

The opposite of internal or soft styles is external or hard styles, which rely on one's own physical strength and capabilities, as well as speed, to achieve a desired outcome in a self-defense or fight situation. Speed, power, and force are employed to attack and defend, rather than relying on circular movements and redirection, which are hallmarks of internal styles. This means that attacks and movement are often more linear and straight-lined (Bowman, 2021; Cynarski, 2019; Harris, 2021; Jennings, 2019).

Traditional Martial Arts

Traditional martial arts are often more process-oriented, emphasizing self-improvement, consistency, and personal growth rather than relying on sport-related outcomes (Bowman, 2021; Cynarski, 2019; Harris, 2021; Mataruna-Dos-Santos et al., 2020). This is often done with a strong focus on meditation and kata/forms practice, a set of choreographed movements designed to simulate fighting one or multiple imaginary opponents (Harris, 2021; Hopkins, 2021; Kane & Wilder, 2005). Such practice can improve one's own mental acuity, self-control, and overall psychological well-being. Traditional martial arts training enables practitioners to benefit from physical training while also enhancing various aspects of their overall lives. This benefit extends beyond the physical benefits of exercise alone. (Harris, 2021).

Modern Styles

Several similarities and differences exist between modern, sport-based, and traditional martial arts. One such example is that modern sports styles generally focus on outcomes related to the practitioners' overall physical abilities. Those who train in these styles condition their bodies for competition, incorporating elements such as cardio and strength training to be better prepared (Harris, 2021). In contrast, traditional martial arts styles, while also focusing on cardio and strength conditioning, focus more intently on enhancing their personal character and moral

values and can tie their training to religious, philosophical, and educational foundations (Bowman, 2021; Cynarski, 2019; Harris, 2021; Mataruna-Dos-Santos et al., 2020).

Striking/Combative Styles

Another common distinction among martial arts styles is whether they emphasize striking or submission-based techniques (Bowman, 2021; Cynarski, 2019; Harris, 2021). Striking is a term used to describe skills such as punching, kicking, blocking, knee, and elbow strikes or techniques (Harris, 2021). Practitioners generally fight from a standing position, aiming to strike their opponent(s) using any of the previously mentioned methods of attack and defense (Bowman, 2021; Cynarski, 2019; Harris, 2021). These styles differ from the grappling arts in that they rarely use wrestling, takedown, and ground-fighting techniques (Harris, 2021).

Grappling Styles

Unlike striking/combative styles, which often involve standing combat and focus on knocking out the opponent, grappling styles place primary emphasis on the ground, aiming to submit the opponent (Bowman, 2021; Cynarski, 2019; Harris, 2021). Submission happens when someone experiences intense pain from joint lock manipulations and other forms of physically compromising positions that cause them to stop and give up fighting, thus giving in to defeat. This is typically achieved by taking the opponent to the ground and placing them in a restraint hold (Harris, 2021). Like striking styles, grappling arts can be practiced competitively and non-competitively (Bowman, 2021; Cynarski, 2019; Harris, 2021).

Mixed Martial Arts (MMA)

Mixed martial arts, also known as MMA, is a combat-based sport that combines a variety of fighting techniques, including striking and stand-up, as well as grappling and ground-based techniques, in competition in either a ring or an octagonal-shaped cage. The most popular

striking styles are kickboxing, karate, and Muay Thai, whereas the most popular grappling and submission styles are usually wrestling and Brazilian Jujitsu (BJJ) (Bowman, 2021; Cynarski, 2019; Harris, 2021; Jennings, 2019; Minosky & Dumoulin, 2023). The goal of the competition is to determine which fighting styles or techniques are superior (Harris, 2021). The winner is determined by the successful execution of a knockout, technical knockout (TKO), submission, or by earning more points than the opponent. Matches are often 2 minutes and divided into 3 to 5 matches (Bowman, 2021; Cynarski, 2019; Harris, 2021).

Combat Sports

Combat sports are sports in which psychological aspects greatly influence performance. They can be understood as the practice of martial arts and fighting in a sporting context, in which the practitioner(s) are concerned with winning. Combat sports are characterized by pre-established rules implemented by regulatory organizations, such as confederations, federations, or leagues (Andreato et al., 2022; Bernick, 2021; Boguszewski, 2019; Correia & Franchini, 2010; Lewandowski, 2020). They are competitive contests of physical prowess, generally between two people, that involve techniques such as punching, kicking, throwing, and grappling. The goal is to overpower your opponent while avoiding being overpowered. Examples of combat sports include mixed martial arts (MMA), wrestling, and boxing (Adejuwon, 2024; Ambrozy et al., 2024).

Summary

For years, martial arts and fitness centers have experienced respectable enrollment numbers but less-than-acceptable retention rates, which have thwarted the long-term educational benefits of the training. This has been due to a lack of understanding of the best practices needed to promote student retention among beginning martial arts students (Barbopoulos & Johansson,

2016; Kim & Zhang, 2019). A vast body of research for motivation in sports and exercise that is based on tenets of self-determination theory – SDT exists; however, when referring to martial arts, that research is limited and generally related to specific disciplines/styles of martial art (Barbopoulos & Johansson, 2016; Biscaia et al., 2021; Kim & Zhang, 2019; Silva & Quaresma, 2019).

This chapter has examined the resources and supports available for retention and identified what may be necessary to overcome the barriers that prevent beginning martial artists from earning the rank of black belt and beyond. This was accomplished through a comprehensive examination of theories of educational practice and their practical application in martial arts instruction to enhance retention. These theories include Victor Vroom's 1964 expectancy theory (ET), also known as the expectancy theory of motivation. It was demonstrated that ET differs from the content of various needs theories formulated by psychologists such as Alderfer, McClelland, Herzberg, and Maslow, as it does not provide specific suggestions about what motivates members of an organization (Lunenburg, 2011). This suggests that people will be motivated if they believe that putting forth a little effort will lead to better performance, indicating that expectancy theory is a cognitive, or mental-process, theory of motivation (Lunenburg, 2011; Vroom, 1964; Zadjia, 2023).

It has been demonstrated that Vroom's expectancy theory is grounded in four specific assumptions, which can be applied to martial arts schools. 1) People join martial arts schools with expectations that are based on their individual needs, motivations, and past experiences. 2) People can choose their behaviors, which are suggested by their expectancy calculations. 3) People look to obtain different things from an organization, such as education, job security, etc.

4) People will choose among various alternatives to optimize outcomes for them personally (Lunenburg, 2011; Vroom, 1964; Vroom & Deci, 1999).

It was then shown that the four assumptions of expectancy theory lead to three key elements: *expectancy* – a person is motivated to the degree that they believe that maximum effort will lead to acceptable performance; *instrumentality* - a person is motivated to the degree that they believe their good performance will be appropriately rewarded; and *valence* – a person is motivated to the degree that they believe the value of the rewards is highly positive (Bateman et al., 2019; Vroom, 1964). This led to the understanding that Vroom’s expectancy theory was influenced by other theories, such as Kurt Lewin’s 1951 field theory, Adam’s 1965 equity theory of motivation, and Bandura’s 1960s cognitive theory of motivation (Zadja, 2023). It has been demonstrated that each theoretical model plays a significant and distinct role in education, contributing substantially to Vroom’s expectancy theory.

This chapter explained that Kurt Lewin’s 1951 field theory holds an important place in education. Educators can approach teaching by addressing the entire learning environment, thereby having a positive impact on facilitating change and student development. Such factors in the learning environment include interactions with the instructor, the social dynamics of the classroom, the physical space itself, and its arrangement to facilitate learning (Cherry, 2023; Qi, 2021). It has been explained that field theory is the foundational concept behind Vroom’s expectancy theory, as it relates to ET’s concept of how a person’s beliefs about the relationships between effort, performance, and the value of potential rewards inspire motivation (Cranach & Tschan, 2001; Qi, 2021). Therefore, field theory emphasizes that one’s behavior is influenced by the interplay of various forces within one's perceptions, encompassing both psychological and external physical space (Qi, 2021).

The following theoretical model, which has been reviewed, is tied to Vroom's expectancy theory and is Adam's equity theory of motivation. It has been shown that both theories suggest that people compare their outcomes with those of others based on their perceptions (Souders, 2019). Equity theory, which stems from social exchange theory (Littlejohn et al., 2021), posits that individuals who perceive themselves as under- or over-rewarded will experience suffering, prompting them to seek to restore equity within the relationship (Adams, 1965). It was made clear how equity theory can be applied to martial arts instruction, as it suggests that those who invest effort in their training want to know that the time they invest will be worthwhile (Freitas & Lacerda, 2019). This is important in martial arts because attaining the various belt ranks is recognized as having distinct personal significance. (Minosky & Dumoulin, 2023; Reis Da Silva Duarte et al., 2022; Sanford & Gill, 2019).

The final model that was studied, which is tied to expectancy theory, was Bandura's 1960s cognitive theory of motivation and how it is not the same as his social learning theory (SLT) as some have often thought as SLT was more focused on the cognitive process and later evolved into social cognitive theory (SCT) (Nabavi & Bijandi, 2011; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). This chapter has demonstrated how Vroom's expectancy theory of motivation is connected to Bandura's social cognitive theory of motivation through the concept of expectancy (Riggio, 2015; Urhahne & Wijnia, 2023; Zajdo, 2023). Social learning theory has significantly impacted teaching methods and classroom management. It can also be used in martial arts instruction by including the following techniques: modeling, peer learning, scaffolding, self-efficacy, self-regulation, and reinforcement (Ko & Kim, 2010; Minosky & Dumoulin, 2023; Reis Da Silva Duarte et al., 2022; Sanford & Gill, 2019; Torres, 2020).

This chapter examines the barriers to retention in martial arts, the role of motivation in sustaining engagement, and the factors contributing to dropout rates. Various studies focusing on these topics were reviewed to determine their relevance to this study. It has been demonstrated how the findings can be applied in this study and how they may relate to the potential outcomes this study aimed to discover.

A review of these theories and research studies may help one better understand the outcome variables listed in the research questions and what is needed to answer them. These variables include the barriers to retention in beginner-level martial arts training, the role of motivation needed to sustain their engagement in training, how former martial arts students perceive the influence of their engagement on their decision to either stop or continue with their martial arts training, and how to reduce the dropout rate in martial arts training.

This chapter outlines several motivational models and their complexities in relation to education and retention in martial arts. The outlined models provide a solid foundation for the education and best practices necessary to successfully retain beginning martial arts students. Together, these models capture the key concepts of Vroom's expectancy theory of motivation, providing a solid foundation for the model.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The problem to be addressed is that the lack of effective strategies for fostering student motivation and engagement among beginner martial arts students leads to high dropout rates, which undermines the long-term educational benefits of martial arts training (Biscaia et al., 2021; Cynarski, 2019; Kim & Zhang, 2019; Ko & Kim, 2010; Silva & Quaresma, 2019). Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to explore former martial arts students' perceptions of barriers to retention and identify the strategies and supports that would have promoted sustained engagement and motivation in their martial arts training. This chapter includes information about the research methodology, design, population and sample, materials and instruments, operational definitions of the variables, study procedures, data analysis, assumptions, limitations, delimitations, ethical assurances, and an overall summary.

The research methodology includes a qualitative narrative study using semi-structured one-on-one interviews to investigate the motivations of former martial arts students. The interview questions were structured and included a predetermined number of open-ended questions for every participant.

The problem statement and purpose of this research led to four key questions.

|RQ1|

How do former martial arts students perceive the barriers to retention in beginner-level martial arts training?

|RQ2|

What are the perceptions of former martial arts students regarding the role of motivation in sustaining their engagement in martial arts training?

|RQ3|

How do former martial arts students perceive the influence of their engagement on their decision to drop out or continue martial arts training?

|RQ4|

What strategies and supports do former martial arts students perceive as necessary for maintaining long-term engagement and reducing dropout rates in martial arts training?

These four questions served as the foundation for creating an interview guide (see Appendices A and B). This interview guide served as the primary research tool for gathering valuable data for the study, providing consistency that supported the efficient and timely completion of the interviews.

Research Methodology

The study employed a qualitative methodology and thoroughly examined student enrollment in various martial arts schools, which are growing exponentially but have received very little research attention regarding recruitment and retention. A focus on qualitative methodology yielded rich, subjective data presented in depth, in written form. To name a few, the textual data from the study can take the form of interview transcripts, diary entries, and observational notes (Creswell & Poth, 2024).

This qualitative study investigated why people prematurely end their martial arts training and what factors may contribute to their retention. The use of inductive strategies helped to analyze the data from the *bottom up*. This allowed the data to be analyzed without the bias of preconceived notions and identify any themes that may be present (Fariba, 2016).

Although a quantitative method may be suggested for future studies, a qualitative design was deemed the best choice for this study. Quantitative methods are less effective at answering

“how” and “why” questions and are better for surveys that tend to answer “who,” “what,” “where,” “how many,” and “how much.” Therefore, quantitative methods are used to collect data and perform complex statistical analyses. This is achieved by working with numerical data that is collected and subjected to statistical analysis to determine whether a relationship exists between a dependent and an independent variable (Bloomfield & Fisher, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2024; Jones, 2023; Thomas, 2017). Alternative and null hypotheses are also used, rather than questions, and the null hypothesis is either accepted or rejected based on the outcome of the statistical analysis (Bloomfield & Fisher, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2024). One of the primary value propositions of this research was that it generated substantial data to inform future quantitative and mixed-methods studies.

Design

The design for this study was narrative. Narrative research is a design in which researchers collect and then analyze the personal stories of the various individuals in their study. This is done to help them better understand those individuals’ personal perspectives, experiences, and meanings through their narrative breakdown. This is often accomplished through in-depth interviews, which encourage individuals to share their stories in their own words, enabling a rich exploration of their lived experiences. Therefore, narrative designs focus on the “story” as the primary source of data, aiming to gain insight and a deeper understanding of a specific phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Dovetail Editorial Team, 2023; McLeod, 2024; Salmons, 2023; Scheffelaar et al., 2021).

A case study protocol was considered, as it outlines the procedures and general rules that need to be followed during the case study. This includes the data collection methods, data sources, and data analysis procedures (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Houghton et al., 2021; Miller et

al., 2023; Nbane, 2023; Priya & Ambedkar, 2020). This is achieved by guiding the researcher through the data collection process, thereby ensuring the reliability of the research (Priya & Ambekar, 2020; Thomas, 2016). Case studies have limitations, including difficulties in transferring findings, potential researcher bias, and challenges with replication and establishing causality (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Radu, 2025).

Another qualitative design considered for this study was an observational study. The research is conducted in the participants' natural environment, either at the martial arts school or online, where data are gathered (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Jones, 2023). The researcher does not attempt to influence the study's outcome while data are being gathered (Jones, 2023). This method of study was not chosen because it would be hard, if not impossible, to determine the martial arts students motivations by observing them alone. The observational design method is more effective when the phenomenon is observed as it occurs, but because the participants are former students, that is not possible. Although the student(s) may appear to be happy and content, it will still be challenging to determine what they are actually thinking (Creswell & Poth; Jones, 2023). This led to the determination that the most suitable method for this study would be a secondhand account of the events, collected through an interview, such as a narrative study.

The descriptive research design was another qualitative design approach considered for this study, as it examined variables in a single sample. Descriptive research describes phenomena in real-life situations (Bloomfield & Fisher, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2024; Jones, 2023). Descriptive research studies can establish the frequency with which something occurs and help describe a specific phenomenon (Jones, 2023). The limitation of using descriptive research in this study was that the findings would not establish cause-and-effect relationships (Bloomfield &

Fisher, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2024). This made a narrative study more viable because it focuses on individuals' life stories, allowing me to understand their personal journeys and experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Radu, 2025).

Population

The target population of this study included former martial arts students. The target population also varied in age, ranging from 18 and above. It primarily originated from martial arts locations throughout Bartlesville and Washington County, Oklahoma, as well as from the United States via social media platforms. These locations differed in the style of martial arts being offered (e.g., karate, taekwondo, jujitsu, MMA). Specific characteristics of the population included buyers who initially decided to join a martial arts school but later dropped out, as well as the actors who interacted with them, facilitated sales, and created product offerings and marketing messages.

Former martial arts students were included to distinguish between their experiences with this phenomenon. This led to a better understanding of why their motivations changed over their training period. Such findings led to data saturation, the point in the research at which more data no longer yielded new insights or themes, making the collected data sufficient to address the research questions (Ahmed, 2025).

Sample

In quantitative studies, sampling logic is a common factor in study design; however, sample sizes are usually irrelevant in qualitative, single-case, and narrative case studies. Some researchers suggest that up to 10 study participants are required to achieve thematic saturation in qualitative studies, while others recommend up to 15 interviewees (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Leedy & Ormrod, 2021; Thomas, 2016). Purposive sampling was used to select the participants.

As the name suggests, purposive sampling involves the intentional selection of individuals. It is a non-probability sampling technique in which the researcher deliberately selects participants based on specific characteristics and criteria relevant to the study's objectives (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Dovetail Editorial Team, 2023). To achieve this, individuals who have previously trained in martial arts were identified through social media and flyers. To maintain confidentiality, names were replaced with pseudonyms (e.g., FS1 = former student 1, FS2 = former student 2). The individuals ranged in age from 18 and above. The population was suitable for a qualitative narrative study using semi-structured one-on-one interviews, as the goal was to investigate the buyer's motives and engagement with martial arts students, document these motivations, and address the problem of acquiring and retaining clients within a commercialized martial arts industry.

Sampling in qualitative research is influenced by both practical and theoretical factors (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Thomas, 2016). This study employed a criterion sample strategy. A criterion sample strategy is a research method in which participants are selected based on predetermined, specific, and relevant criteria to the study question. This means that only participants who meet those specific criteria are included in the sample. This helps ensure that the collected data is directly related to the research focus (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Czernek-Marszalek & McCabe, 2024; Thomas, 2016). Both purposeful data collection and criterion sampling are compatible with qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Thomas, 2016). Therefore, recruiting participants who have experienced the phenomena of interest to the research (i.e., martial arts training) was vital, as it enabled the collection of in-depth insights and valuable information.

All research study participants met the criterion of having been former martial arts students. Typically, researchers strive for data saturation when data collection no longer yields a steady stream of new motives, themes, insights, or information (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Naeem, 2024; Thomas, 2016). Data saturation is the specific and desired point in the research process at which an adequate amount of data has been gathered to draw necessary conclusions, and any further data collection will not yield value-added insights (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Naeem, 2024; Thomas, 2016; Rahimi & Khatooni, 2024).

Potential study participants were recruited through flyer distribution in the target area and via social media. The target area featured billboards around the community that allowed flyers to be posted for a variety of topics, including job availability and new business information. Contact information, including my email address and phone number, was included on the flyer for those who wished to participate in the study. Others were recruited through social media introductions, letters and flyers on various martial arts platforms, in-person visits, and personal referrals. A qualitative, narrative inquiry was employed to explore and, when possible, identify why a majority of beginning martial arts students often discontinued their training shortly after commencing. This initiative examined martial arts locations throughout Bartlesville and Washington County, Oklahoma, as well as in other areas across the United States, using social media platforms. The data collected from the interviews was then categorized and analyzed using NVivo® data analysis software.

Instrumentation

Semi-structured, one-on-one interviews were used to investigate the motivations and experiences of former martial arts students. The interviews were employed to investigate the factors influencing buyer retention among former martial arts students. Narrative studies are

well-suited for this approach, as they examine how people structure their stories and their overall themes to explore human existence (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Radu, 2025).

Semi-structured one-on-one interviews were used as an additional data collection tool. The reason one would choose to use semi-structured interviews for data collection is to collect and gather valuable information from key informants and stakeholders who have personal experiences, perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes that are related to the specific topic of interest (Baiao Junior et al., 2024; Creswell & Poth, 2024; DeMarco, 2020; Ruslin et al., 2022). Semi-structured interviews allow for focused sessions in which I identified a specific topic, developed a limited number of questions, and prepared a list of follow-up questions (Bussetto et al., 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2024; Hamilton & Finley, 2019). The interviews were conducted with former martial arts students. Open-ended questions were formulated based on an extensive literature review and incorporated into an interview guide (see Appendix A). The guide included a list of questions and subject areas to be explored during the interview process. It was used as a tool to facilitate conversations that yielded valuable information for the study. This approach enabled consistency across the various interviews while still allowing them to remain fluid, thereby increasing the ability to obtain in-depth information and conduct them efficiently and promptly (Creswell & Poth, 2024). One-on-one interviews were conducted to ensure participant confidentiality and to make participants more comfortable during the interview process. Before the interview, all participants were informed in detail about the study, including its purpose, the measures taken to ensure confidentiality, and the benefits of participating, among other details (see Appendix D and E).

Using a semi-structured one-on-one interview was appropriate for this qualitative narrative study, as it served as a guide for interviews, rather than developing and controlling

coding schemes (Thomas, 2016). They enable researchers to gather detailed, information-rich stories from participants by providing a structured framework while also allowing the flexibility needed to explore those experiences in greater depth on an individual basis. This enables the researcher to capture significant narratives and personal meanings that are grounded in a specific topic (Creswell & Poth, 2024; DeJonckheere & Vagn, 2019; Dovetail Editorial Team, 2023; Dunwoodie et al., 2022; Stofer, 2023). Such interviews are generally used in consumer behavior and business studies (Thomas, 2016).

Member checks were used in the study. The term refers to a technique in which researchers share their collected data with other study participants to verify the accuracy, reliability, and credibility of interpretations of interview transcripts and preliminary findings, allowing participants to correct and/or confirm the researcher's understanding of the data. In short, member checks are a method of ensuring that the research findings align with and resonate with the participants' perspectives (Birt et al., 2016; Delve & Limpaecher, 2023; Urry et al., 2024). After the member checks were complete and the data were refined and validated, credibility was further established by using quotations that captured participant responses impartially and without bias, exactly as stated during the interview process, demonstrating my neutrality and proper transparency (Birt et al., 2016; Eldh et al., 2020).

A field test was used to refine and validate the interview questions and guide. Field tests are vital for semi-structured one-on-one interviews because they enable researchers to identify potential flaws in the interview questions and design before the study is conducted. This helped to ensure that the chosen data to be collected is comprehensive, relevant to the study, and accurate by allowing the refinement of the questions and eliminating any issues that may have arisen when questioning the participants (Busetto, 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2024; DeJonckheere

& Vaughn, 2019; Dunwoodie et al., 2022). A small group of respondents with similar backgrounds to those targeted for the formal narrative study was used to review the interview questions. The respondents were asked to comment on the language, wording, and overall interpretation of the interview questions, and their responses were considered for revision where necessary.

Interviews were conducted in a natural setting, either in person or via Google Meet if necessary, to help participants feel more comfortable and at ease, thereby providing an opportunity to gather more accurate and valuable information. It is preferred that in-person one-on-one interviews be conducted to directly observe and assess nonverbal cues that may arise during the interview (Busetto, 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2024; DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019; Dunwoodie et al., 2022; Thomas, 2016). When possible, a recording device was used to transcribe the received data, while taking notes to ensure nothing vital was missing. A one-month timeframe was allocated to conduct the interviews and gather the information.

The participants were asked open-ended questions on, to name a few, such topics as why they chose to enroll personally in a martial arts class, what they like(d) and dislike(d) about the class, what are their perceptions regarding the role of motivation in sustaining their engagement in martial arts training, what would lead them to decide to end their training, what strategies and supports would be needed to keep them engaged in their training, and why they chose to end their training (see Appendix A and B). Several themes were explored, looked at, and considered when interviewing the participants, including but not limited to those related to their overall motivation for selecting and choosing to continue in their martial arts training, perceived benefits received by training and even dropping out, possible key influences, and any needs that the instructors and training succeeded or failed in meeting. Following the closure of the interview

process, participants were debriefed, and any additional questions or comments that arose from either the participants or me were addressed. Also, to be included in the debriefing was a thorough and systematic step-by-step review of the data that was gathered to ensure accuracy, a detailed explanation to the participants on the next steps associated with the analysis of the data that was been collected, a formal request to follow-up at a later time via email, text, call, Google Meet/Zoom, or in person, and a final written thank you for the participants taking time to participate in the study.

Study Procedures

The study procedures and data-gathering method consisted of three primary phases. First, a detailed letter about me, including the nature of and reason for the study, a permission letter to the social media administrator (if it is a closed-group), and an informed consent form was used and then obtained by me that all proper recipients were asked to sign upon receiving those forms to show proper consent (see Appendixes A, B, C, D, and E). The consent form included a detailed description and a list of steps, procedures, and protocols to be followed throughout the research process, all of which were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Once all participants had signed and returned the consent form, it was stored electronically in a secure, encrypted location. A copy of the consent form was provided to the participants, the dissertation chair, and the IRB. Qualitative, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews were conducted with former martial arts students. Proper triangulation of sources through interviews with former students enabled a rich and diverse influx of perspectives on the phenomenon of martial arts student engagement and retention being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2024). If at any time the participant wished to end their participation or withdraw consent, they were allowed to do so, and the interview ended immediately, with no hard feelings or retaliation

from me. The semi-structured one-on-one interviews were transcribed and analyzed according to Leedy and Ormrod's (2021) suggested approach, which involved defining the concepts and relationships, converting text into frequency distributions, examining the contexts of these frequency distributions and relationships within these contexts, and displaying the resulting maps graphically. The data analysis software for content analysis was NVivo® 15, which provided insight into the data and assisted with coding and content factor analysis.

After IRB approval to conduct the study, participants were recruited and interviewed. The next step included member checks, conducted via email, text, call, Google Meet/Zoom, or in person, to confirm responses, ensure accurate data collection, and inquire about any additional reflections on the topic following the first interaction. In qualitative research, member checks are a technique in which researchers share their collected data with other study participants to verify the accuracy, reliability, and credibility of interpretations of interview transcripts and preliminary findings. This allows participants to correct and/or confirm the researcher's understanding of the data. In short, member checks are a method of ensuring that the research findings align with and resonate with the participants' perspectives (Birt et al., 2016; Delve & Limpaecher, 2023; Urry et al., 2024). After the member checks were complete and the data were refined and validated, credibility was further established by using quotations that captured participant responses impartially and non-biased, exactly as stated during the interview process, demonstrating my neutrality and proper transparency (Birt et al., 2016; Eldh et al., 2020). The information gathered was then transcribed and coded following the member checks.

Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis method was used to help aid in proper thematic saturation. This qualitative research approach involved becoming more familiar with

the data, generating initial codes, combining those codes to create themes, reviewing, naming, and defining the themes, and finally reporting the findings. Conducting these steps enabled the identification of patterns and meaning within the dataset by systematically analyzing it for recurring themes (Appinio Research, 2023; Asia Pacific Insights, 2024; Clarke & Braun, 2013; Dovetail Editorial Team, 2023).

The semi-structured one-on-one interviews were transcribed and analyzed according to Leedy and Ormrod's (2021) suggested approach. The data was reviewed to identify the main points each participant made, each participant's perspectives, how each participant's ideas, motives, and beliefs differed, and any recurring themes that may or may not exist. The data analysis software used for content analysis was NVivo® 15, which provided insights into the data and assisted with coding and content factor analysis. NVivo® is a valuable tool because it enables researchers to develop an understanding of potential themes in the data (Jones, 2023).

NVivo® 15 is software specifically designed for qualitative data analysis. It allows researchers to organize, code, analyze, map, model, and visualize large amounts of textual data from sources such as interviews, surveys, field notes, and documents, making it a vital tool for identifying patterns and themes within qualitative research studies (Jones, 2023; Office of Innovation Technologies, 2023; Penna, 2024; Zamawe, 2015). It can be used for both qualitative and mixed-methods research that requires analyzing spreadsheets, image files, PDFs, audio, web content, texts, and various other file types (Jones, 2023). The NVivo tools can also provide visualizations and graphs based on the uploaded data. This software, therefore, empowers researchers to discover rich insights within their qualitative data (Jones, 2023; Penna, 2024).

Assumptions

Several assumptions existed within this study. The first assumption was that all participants would answer honestly and with integrity. It was possible that the participants in this study might have provided false and misleading information, which is often due to factors like social desirability bias, where individuals may want to present a positive image of themselves by giving answers that they believe are socially acceptable or that I would want to hear, even if they are not entirely truthful (Roehl & Harland, 2022). Other factors that may have led the participants to be untruthful included the desire to conceal socially disapproved behaviors and opinions, as well as the willingness to demonstrate mastery of the content (Bispo, 2022). Nevertheless, a study by Mozersky et al. (2020) found that although participants recognized that the risks of sharing information varied with the nature of the sensitive data, many were still willing to share their information as long as they knew their identities were protected.

Another assumption was that the population was sufficient to achieve data saturation and the necessary depth for meaningful results. A population is considered sufficiently large for data saturation in a qualitative study when it captures the full range of perspectives and themes relevant to the research question. When collecting additional data does not yield any significantly new insights or codes, it indicates that sufficient information to draw meaningful conclusions has been gathered (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Dovetail Editorial Team, 2023; Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

A third assumption was that I would not use the narrative case study to validate preconceived notions and would remain unbiased, accepting any findings presented. This comes from the inherent nature of qualitative research. Qualitative research emphasizes a rich understanding of complex phenomena and in-depth exploration, which requires the researcher to

remain open to emergent interpretations and themes that may or may not align with their initial expectations (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Hecker & Kalpokas, 2025; Lim, 2024). This is further supported by the practice of reflexivity, which involves researchers actively examining and acknowledging their own biases throughout the research process (Lim, 2024).

A final assumption was that I was competent and willing to remain credible and unbiased, thereby ensuring accuracy, which would be enhanced through member checking. This was important because it helped to mitigate potential bias and ensured that the study's findings accurately reflected the participants' lived experiences. This enhanced the research's trustworthiness and credibility by allowing participants to validate my interpretation of the data (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Lim, 2024).

Limitations

Narrative case studies in qualitative research have several limitations. Such limitations can include high subjectivity in interpretation, difficulty in generalizing findings to a broader population due to the focus on a single person's story, concerns about the accuracy of recalled memories, potential researcher bias, and time-consuming data analysis. All of these limitations make it challenging to verify and corroborate the narrative's reliability (Al-Saraf, 2023; Priya & Ambedkar, 2021). Narrative studies are susceptible to threats to rigor from the researcher, allowing bias to enter the analysis or resulting in a lack of discipline in the study's execution or in the careful documentation of the interviews (Priya & Ambedkar, 2021; Thomas, 2016). The number of participants can also be a limitation, and data saturation may occur when participants' answers become repetitive during the interview (Jones, 2023). The decision to conduct one-on-one interviews for this research helped to mitigate this limitation. Another limitation was the sensitivity of the answers regarding the interview questions being asked. Martial arts school

owners may have chosen to provide false information about why certain students chose to end their training, thereby protecting the school's reputation. Martial arts school owners may also have been hesitant to provide former clients' information to a researcher they may or may not have known. This underscores the importance of ensuring participants' confidentiality.

These limitations and others that may not have been considered were mitigated by my diligence, a well-defined and well-structured group study protocol, audio recordings of interviews when permitted, and a clear, well-defined interview guide. Member checks were used to verify the data's validity. Other strategies to mitigate limitations within the study included employing thick descriptions to enrich the context, triangulating data sources, and acknowledging potential researcher bias (Ahmed, 2024).

The process of reflexivity (also known as bracketing) was used. In this process, researchers examine their own biases, experiences, and assumptions to fully understand how they may influence the interpretation of the data and research process. This means that the researcher acknowledges their own subjectivity and critically reflects on its impact on the study findings. Therefore, reflexivity is a collaborative, multifaceted, continuous, and ongoing practice (Bunham, 2023; Hecker & Kalpokas, 2025; McLeod, 2024; Olmos-Vega, 2022).

Delimitations

The major delimitations of the study were the population's demographics and psychographics. Given the location's convenience, the proposed participants primarily came from martial arts studios throughout Bartlesville and Washington County, Oklahoma. Other areas throughout the United States were used via social media platforms, with a primary focus on former martial arts students aged 18 and above, to better understand retention and engagement in a martial arts school. The proposed participant psychographic was students studying a variety of

martial arts, including, but not limited to, karate, Kung Fu, taekwondo, jujitsu, and mixed martial arts (MMA). These styles were the primary focus of the study because they are the most popular and have a strong history of commercialization (Thomas, 2016). Additionally, all these styles have been shown to share similar forms of motivation (Cynarski, 2012, 2016, 2019; Thomas, 2016). Former martial arts students were included to examine their motivations, which led to a better understanding of why they changed over the course of their training. While doing this, the possibility of some dropping out and ending their martial arts altogether, as well as those who end their training only to find another school and possibly a different style that they prefer, thus resuming their training elsewhere, was taken into consideration.

Ethical Assurances

Before gathering any information for this study, approval was obtained from the National University IRB. After IRB approval was granted, informed consent was obtained from all study participants. The IRB requires that risks be minimized and that researchers take the necessary measures to safeguard the safety and anonymity of study participants. The IRB ensures that research involving human subjects adheres to ethical principles, primarily focusing on three key areas: respect for persons (informed consent), beneficence (maximizing benefits and minimizing risks), and justice (fair subject selection) (Dickens, 2023; Kim, 2012). I obtained informed consent from all study participants and ensured that their rights were protected. A copy of the consent letter is provided in Appendix F. Informed consent provides an ethical foundation for minimizing participant risk (Shah et al., 2024).

There were risks associated with using an informed consent form in this research, as participants may not have fully understood the study's potential risks and benefits even after signing the form. This could have led to situations in which participation was not entirely

voluntary due to factors such as unclear instructions, complex language, or external pressure. Other potential risks included coercion, breaches of confidentiality, and the possibility that participants may have been psychologically impacted by the research process itself (Shah et al., 2024; Zankary et al., 2022). To address these risks, affirmative consent was continually monitored throughout the study, recognizing that participants could choose to withdraw or change their consent at any time. The wording of the consent forms was kept clear and straightforward to ensure that all participants could make informed decisions about their participation in the study.

Participation was voluntary, and all reasonable precautions were taken to protect the confidentiality of the participants' responses. Confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process to safeguard all data and participants, with appropriate protections in place. Interviews were recorded when permitted, and all data were analyzed without exposing any identifying information. Letter and numerical codes were used to identify study participants and organizations to maintain confidentiality. All participants retained control over their involvement and were informed of their right to withdraw from the interview process at any time. The consent forms and research data were stored on an encrypted, password-protected thumb drive accessible only to me. The thumb drive and audio recordings were stored in a fireproof safe. In accordance with IRB guidelines, all research data will be securely deleted after three years (Jackson & Moscou-Jackson, 2023).

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to investigate former martial arts students' perceptions of barriers to retention and to identify the strategies and supports that would have promoted sustained engagement and motivation in their martial arts training.

Stakeholders were interviewed using semi-structured one-on-one interviews to achieve triangulation and gather rich, in-depth data. After the interviews were transcribed, a field test was conducted to refine and validate the interview questions and guide (Busetto, 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2024; DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019; Dunwoodie et al., 2022). Member checks were conducted with study participants to ensure that all data were accurately captured and reflected the participants' experiences (Birt et al., 2016; Delve & Limpaecher, 2023; Urry et al., 2024). Data were gathered, reviewed, and analyzed until saturation was reached.

The data derived from this study may be used to create an initial body of knowledge regarding consumer and buyer motivation to enroll in and continue martial arts training. The findings can inform the development of future qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods research studies. Business owners in the martial arts industry may also utilize these findings to develop and refine more effective marketing and instructional strategies that attract and retain students, ultimately supporting long-term business sustainability. Additionally, scholars may use these findings to extend existing theories related to motivation and consumer behavior.

Chapter 4: Findings

Many martial arts organizations' key concern is attracting and retaining students (Nuñez-Barriopedro et al., 2021). Research in martial arts and combat sports, as well as the motivations that drive individuals to train, is limited and often very specific to a single discipline or style. Therefore, addressing this issue requires understanding the buyer's motivations (Reis Da Silva Duarte et al., 2022; Silva & Quaresma, 2019). The problem to be addressed is that the lack of effective strategies for fostering student motivation and engagement among beginner martial arts students leads to high dropout rates, which undermines the long-term educational benefits of martial arts training (Biscaia et al., 2021; Cynarski, 2019; Kim & Zhang, 2019; Ko & Kim, 2010; Silva & Quaresma, 2019). Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative narrative study is to explore the perceptions of former martial arts students regarding barriers to retention and identify the strategies and supports that would have promoted sustained engagement and motivation in their martial arts training. This is important, as Freitas and Lacerda (2019) and Kim et al. (2021) noted that customers in the sports and fitness field who reported higher perceived customer service quality also expressed higher satisfaction with the facility. This chapter includes an introduction, an assessment of the data's trustworthiness, the results of the data analysis, an evaluation of the findings, and a summary of the chapter's overall conclusions.

A qualitative narrative methodology was employed to examine enrollment and retention patterns in martial arts schools. This topic has received limited scholarly attention despite the rapid growth of martial arts participation. This qualitative study investigated why people prematurely end their martial arts training and what factors may contribute to their retention. Inductive strategies were used to analyze the data from the *bottom up*. This has allowed the data to be analyzed without the bias of preconceived notions and to identify any themes that may be

present (Fariba, 2016). The design for this study was narrative. Narrative research involves collecting and analyzing participants' personal stories to better understand their lived experiences and the meanings they assign to them (Creswell & Poth, 2024; Salmons, 2023; Scheffelaar et al., 2021).

Semi-structured, one-on-one interviews were used to investigate the motivations and experiences of former martial arts students. The interview questions were structured and included a predetermined number of open-ended questions for every participant. The interviews captured precise and valuable data on the participants — former martial arts students — and their perceptions of the motivation required to sustain their engagement in martial arts training, as well as why they chose to drop out rather than continue and earn the rank of black belt or higher.

Participants were recruited through Facebook groups, word-of-mouth, and flyers distributed in Bartlesville and Tulsa, Oklahoma. The requirements to participate in the study included being at least 18 years old, having training experience in martial arts or combat sports, and having quit training before achieving the rank of a black belt or higher. The interview questions (located in Appendix A) were designed to address my overall study questions, and the interview protocol was developed by me and approved by the IRB. Member checking was conducted to help strengthen the credibility of the data. The interviews were conducted either in person at a mutually agreed-upon location or via Google Meet. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Each participant reviewed their transcript for accuracy, strengthening the credibility of the data. The participants' responses were reviewed to compile a list of notable statements. These statements were analyzed for patterns and similarities, then coded into themes using NVivo 15®. All data were de-identified, and pseudonyms were assigned during the data collection and analysis to keep confidentiality.

This chapter presents the study's findings, including quotations from participants' responses to various questions detailing their overall experiences and feelings during martial arts training; an interpretation and evaluation of the results; and a summary of the key findings. To illustrate how motivation to join martial arts may evolve during the training process, a section on motivations to join and the themes associated with those motives has been added. This can reveal a gap between the initial expectations and the reality of the training. The section will focus solely on the initial decision to join, to avoid data saturation. All study protocols approved by the IRB were successfully implemented and strictly followed.

Trustworthiness of the Data

The research participants were sought out and recruited through various martial arts group platforms on Facebook, word-of-mouth, and strategically placed flyers in Bartlesville and Tulsa, Oklahoma. The flyers and social media posts specifically detailed the eligibility requirements for participating in the study. The participants chosen were those who freely and openly provided their information. In contrast, those who sought financial compensation for their information were turned away, as it raised questions about whether the potential participant had trained in the martial arts or was seeking financial compensation. All participants met the criteria of being over 18 and former martial arts students who ended their training before earning the rank of black belt. The IRB was informed of all the study's requirements and approved the research. Although I had prior familiarity with some participants, safeguards were implemented to prevent bias. All interviews followed the same standardized protocol, and every participant was asked the same questions in accordance with the research guidelines approved by the National University Institutional Review Board.

The criteria were carefully established to ensure that the data in the qualitative study are trustworthy. According to Ahmed (2024) and Bloomberg and Volpe (2022), to be considered trustworthy, strategies must be implemented that demonstrate the believability and rigor of the findings. To accomplish this, all four aspects, often referred to as the four pillars of trustworthiness, must be established. These four values include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. When all four of these values are achieved, the findings are consistent and transparent, reflect the participant(s) ' perspectives, are free from researcher bias, and can be applied to other contexts. This section will demonstrate how all four values were established and maintained throughout the research process to ensure the trustworthiness of the collected data.

Credibility

Credibility was established through member checks. Once the interviews were completed and I reviewed the transcripts, I sent the transcribed versions to the participants and asked them to verify that they accurately reflected what they shared. By conducting member checks, the accuracy of the findings was verified, helping ensure that personal bias did not influence how participants were portrayed and that perspectives were not altered (Ahmed, 2024; Bloomberg & Volpe, 2022).

Transferability

A study achieves transferability when its results can be applied to or relevant to other studies (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2022). Researchers enable readers to evaluate the applicability of the findings to similar situations by providing comprehensive and detailed explanations, thereby enhancing the study's transferability (Ahmed, 2024; Bloomberg & Volpe, 2022). A thick description of the data and participants has been provided, thereby allowing readers to assess

transferability. This is achieved because a thick description of the data provides rich, detailed contextual information, enhancing understanding by allowing others to assess the applicability of the findings to their own situations (Jansen & Rautenbach, 2025).

Dependability

When my research process was clearly documented, logical, and traceable, dependability was achieved (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2022). Therefore, I was able to reproduce the study and ensure the dependability of the results by creating and preserving an audit trail — a comprehensive log documenting decisions made throughout the research process (Ahmed, 2024). Dependability was ensured and achieved by establishing a clear data collection scheme, as outlined in Chapter Three. The data collection techniques remained consistent throughout the study. The National University IRB also approved the procedures and methodologies, which were strictly followed throughout the research.

Confirmability

Confirmability concerns the objectivity and impartiality of the findings, ensuring the findings were not influenced by my preferences or biases (Ahmed, 2024; Bloomberg & Volpe, 2022). To ensure confirmability, all interviews were recorded using Sound Recorder on participants' personal laptop computers. When the participants were in a different setting from me, the interviews were recorded on Google Meet. The data was transcribed, and member checking was conducted to verify the accuracy of participants' responses to the interview questions. Once the transcripts were verified as accurate and the participant's perception was captured, the data were considered usable.

Results

The research participants were ten former martial arts students (N=10) who trained in various styles (e.g., Taekwondo, Kickboxing, Karate, Judo, Wing Chun) across three countries (United States, United Kingdom, and China) and quit training before earning the rank of Black Belt. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 59 years, with a gender breakdown of eight males and two females. Participant recruitment and screening protocols, including the semi-structured interview process, were strictly adhered to as approved by the IRB. Detailed demographic and training profiles for each participant (FS1–FS10) are presented in Appendix G. Data saturation was achieved after the seventh interview, as the remaining three interviews yielded no new codes or themes related to the research questions. I ensured the data's trustworthiness through member-checking protocols and adherence to the established audit trail.

The following section presents the study's findings on the motivational factors that led the participant to join a martial arts school. The stakeholders were all former martial arts students who were over 18 and had quit training in their chosen martial arts style before earning the rank of black belt. The former student interviewees are designated by the pseudonym 'FSX,' where 'FS' stands for 'former student' and 'X' represents the participant's number (in this case, 1 to 10) within the study to preserve confidentiality. To avoid data saturation, this section focused on the primary motivation for their decision to join a martial arts school.

Research Question 1.

How do former martial arts students perceive the barriers to retention in beginner-level martial arts training?

The following section presents the study's initial findings on the motivational factors that led the participants to join a martial arts school, focusing on the primary factor behind each

participant's decision. The thematic analysis revealed six dominant themes, which are ranked by their recurrence across the 10 participant narratives. The most frequently cited theme for initial enrollment was Self-Defense/Bullying Prevention (N=6), which often included narratives of overcoming past trauma or of seeking protective skills. Tied for the third most significant reason for joining martial arts was film/TV/media influence and self-empowerment. The following sections will provide an in-depth narrative exploration of each of these six themes.

The five primary motivational themes were identified from the interviews with former martial arts students (N=10) who explained their initial decision to enroll in a martial arts school. The analysis of participant responses revealed that motivations were typically multifaceted, ranging from practical safety concerns to extrinsic requirements. These themes, derived through qualitative analysis using NVivo 15®, include: Self-Defense/Bully Prevention; Health/Fitness; Film/TV/Media Influence; Self-Empowerment; and Extrinsic Factor/Work-Related.

Theme 1: Self-Defense/Bully Prevention. The most frequently cited motivation for joining a martial arts school was the need or desire for self-defense and bullying prevention (N = 6). Participants frequently described experiences of vulnerability or trauma that led directly to enrollment, reflecting a need to acquire practical skills for protection. One participant described joining as a response to domestic trauma: “My dad was abusive, like very, um, verbally, but like there was trauma, and my trauma response was to defend myself and/or at least learn how to defend myself, and it was also my way of getting out of the house” (FS3).

Another recalled an early experience that prompted training: “I was jumped when I was seven and took a knife to school, so my mom wanted me to learn self-defense and build discipline” (FS8). For some, the decision stemmed from familial encouragement and a perceived lack of confidence: “My grandfather thought it would do wonders for my confidence as well as

give me the potential tool for bullying situations... he always wanted me to be safe” (FS1). This theme highlights how martial arts were initially perceived as a protective mechanism, often emerging from participants’ exposure to real or perceived threats.

Another participant summarized this desire for competence: “Apart from being a little ‘wimpy boy’ in a small town full of some strong country folk and the dream, slash promise, of the Hollywood portrayal that, ‘you can stand up to bullies’” (FS9). In summary, Theme 1 illustrates that participants were primarily motivated to join martial arts for safety, empowerment, and self-reliance. Self-defense and bullying prevention functioned as both practical and psychological responses to experiences of fear, vulnerability, and past trauma.

Theme 2: Health/Fitness. Four participants identified health and fitness as a primary motivation for enrolling in martial arts training. This theme was characterized by a desire to combat a sedentary lifestyle, improve overall physical condition, and gain muscle mass. One participant, seeking an active alternative to other sports, stated, “I avoided all sports in school and would do nothing but read, so I wanted to get fit” (FS5).

For those in professional careers, the need for mandatory activity was a strong driver: “I had a desk job, so it was a way to force myself to move around, be active, and gain some muscle mass as well” (FS10). The physical benefit was often intertwined with other motivations, as one former student noted, “For self-defense and health” (FS7), and another mentioned their goal was to get them “in shape” (FS1). Collectively, participants who emphasized health and fitness viewed martial arts as a structured and motivating way to improve physical well-being. Training provided an active lifestyle alternative that promoted discipline, movement, and overall vitality while complementing other personal goals, such as self-defense and confidence-building.

Theme 3: Film/TV/Media Influence. Media consumption directly influenced three participants' decision to join a martial arts school. The initial appeal was often tied to nostalgic or aspirational portrayals of martial arts in popular culture. One participant noted that "The first ever *Karate Kid* movie also made me want to learn" (FS2).

This common cultural touchpoint was shared by others who recalled liking "the *Karate Kid* movies" (FS6) and being drawn in by "the dream, slash promise, of the Hollywood portrayal that..." (FS9). Such portrayals often emphasized discipline, transformation, and personal empowerment, shaping how participants viewed martial arts before ever stepping into a training space. Collectively, popular media served as a powerful motivator, idealizing the martial arts experience. For many participants, film and television representations created an emotional connection that transformed admiration into action, sparking their initial commitment to training.

Theme 4: Self-Empowerment. The motivation for self-empowerment was identified in three participants and centered on the desire for personal development, self-improvement, and regaining control over one's life. This factor was often linked to recovery or healing after experiencing difficult personal circumstances. Participants described martial arts as a means of rebuilding confidence and establishing inner strength through structured practice.

One participant specifically sought martial arts after a series of unhealthy relationships, stating they wanted to "learn how to protect myself by regaining that power... Yes, domestic abuse and wanting to learn how to defend myself" (FS7). This sentiment of finding internal strength was echoed by another, who was motivated to see what they were "capable of" (FS5), and by a third, who offered, "Empowerment is a good, one-word summation of the initiation to enroll" (FS9). Collectively, participants seeking self-empowerment viewed martial arts as a path to personal transformation and resilience. Training provided a structured environment to rebuild

self-confidence, assert independence, and regain a sense of control after challenging life experiences.

Theme 5: Extrinsic Factor/Work-Related. Training was not purely voluntary for two participants, whose enrollment was driven by external or professional requirements. This theme reflected motivations that were tied to workplace expectations or formal career development needs. In these cases, martial arts training was undertaken as a condition of employment or professional advancement rather than for personal interest.

One participant noted the requirement for their profession: “I had to train for several hours and received certification at the academy” (FS1). Similarly, another former student's training was tied directly to military service: “I trained in MCMAP (Marine Corps Martial Arts Program), which was required for the Marines” (FS6). These examples illustrate how martial arts participation can extend beyond personal goals and align instead with institutional or occupational objectives. Collectively, extrinsic or work-related factors influenced some participants to engage in martial arts for professional rather than personal reasons. For these individuals, training served as a structured obligation that nonetheless provided opportunities for physical conditioning, discipline, and transferable life skills.

Following the discussion of participants’ initial motivations for joining martial arts training, the following section presents findings on the reasons they discontinued before attaining the rank of black belt. These findings address the remaining research questions, which explore how former students’ motivations evolved and what barriers contributed to attrition. Data were gathered exclusively from adult participants who voluntarily left martial arts training prior to earning a black belt, and all quotations are attributed to pseudonyms (FS1–FS10) to maintain confidentiality.

Analysis in NVivo® identified five primary themes related to Research Question 1: (a) psychological and emotional barriers, (b) environmental and logistical barriers, (c) instructor and school cultural barriers, (d) expectation versus reality barriers, and (e) systemic and contextual barriers. These overarching themes encompassed approximately 23 subcategories, including both extrinsic factors (e.g., time constraints, financial limitations, inconvenient class schedules) and intrinsic factors (e.g., injury, loss of motivation, perceived lack of progress). The following subsections describe each theme in detail, beginning with Theme 1: Psychological and Emotional Barriers.

Theme 1: Psychological and Emotional Barriers. The findings for Research Question 1 revealed that psychological and emotional barriers were the most frequently cited factors influencing participants' decisions to discontinue martial arts training. This theme encompasses internal thoughts, feelings, self-perception, motivation, and emotional responses to the training environment. Participants commonly described fatigue, burnout, loss of purpose, boredom, low confidence, fear of injury, anxiety, and frustration with slow progress as contributing factors.

For instance, FS1 explained that “as a kid, the forms were a struggle, mostly because of the lack of resources, and when you have an attention deficit, trying to sit still and remember is not engaging,” illustrating how cognitive challenges and limited support reduced motivation. Similarly, FS3 stated, “My main reason was I really didn't want to hurt people...I got into a mode where I was seeing red all the time, and I would hurt my sparring partners...I was like, ‘I can't do this for a living,’” highlighting the emotional conflict between aggression and empathy that discouraged continued practice.

FS6 also recalled that “Taekwondo [was] probably too aggressive for a 5-year-old because I had a giant kick me in the stomach, and that was super painful,” emphasizing how

early negative experiences created long-term emotional aversion to training. Collectively, these accounts suggest that psychological and emotional barriers—especially frustration, fear, and lack of confidence—played a significant role in shaping the decision to quit martial arts before achieving a black belt.

Theme 2: Environmental and Logistical Barriers. This theme addresses external and practical obstacles, including financial, time, and geographical issues. All 10 participants described barriers under this theme. Five primary categories were identified: (a) financial barriers, (b) time constraints, (c) geographical/transportation issues, (d) quality/availability of the facilities, and (e) inclusive and cultural environment. For example, FS1 explained that “if there were a judo school somewhere closer than Tulsa and hours I could hit, I would happily finish that martial art journey and finish the belting,” illustrating the impact of location on continued engagement.

Financial constraints were also common; FS4 shared, “Other schools I had to quit because I didn’t have transportation, and for financial reasons, I could not afford the classes...And then with China, I moved back to the States.” Facility conditions were another deterrent. FS2 reflected, “The pain that came after, the padding was old, so when you were hit, you felt it...And boxing was not very cost-efficient, and running everything I had saved up dry.” These experiences underscore how logistical and environmental factors—primarily cost, accessibility, and travel distance—constantly served as consistent barriers to long-term retention across participants.

Theme 3: Instructor and School Cultural Barriers. Instructor and school cultural barriers emerged as a prominent theme among all participants, highlighting issues within the social, instructional, and managerial dynamics of the martial arts environment. Participants

described experiences with instructor behavior, teaching style, and school culture that negatively affected their motivation and ultimately led them to quit. Thematic analysis revealed three core categories: instructor-related barriers, school culture-related barriers, and culturally influenced financial or logistical barriers.

Several participants cited poor instructional methods, inflated egos, or inconsistent teaching philosophies as major deterrents. For example, FS5 stated, “I hated that I had the occasional a**hole instructor, the ones who thought their word was law, and that many times I wasn’t at the school long enough to really learn anything worthwhile,” emphasizing the impact of authoritarian or dismissive instruction on student engagement. Similarly, FS2 explained that “for taekwondo, they actually sold their building, and I just never re-instated in their new location as it just didn’t feel the same, and I felt like, ‘Why am I here?’ ...The atmosphere did a complete 180,” illustrating how abrupt environmental changes and shifts in school culture diminished the sense of belonging.

FS7 added that “the instructors were doing and saying bad things on social media, and they went from teaching karate to MMA, which I didn’t like and want to do...The structure was aggravating as more time was spent on having fun than learning,” reflecting how changes in program direction and instructor professionalism eroded trust and alignment with student goals. Collectively, these narratives underscore how instructor behavior, school culture, and organizational inconsistency created environments that discouraged persistence in martial arts training.

Theme 4: Expectation vs. Reality Barriers. The theme of expectation vs. reality barriers highlights the disconnect between what students anticipated from martial arts training and what they ultimately experienced. All 10 participants described varying degrees of mismatch

between their initial expectations and the actual training environment, which contributed to their decision to discontinue. Thematic analysis identified four primary categories within this theme: skill development, physical transformation and rewards, the learning process, and the social culture or environment. Many participants entered martial arts expecting rapid skill acquisition, physical results, or a cinematic sense of excitement, only to encounter a slower, more repetitive, and physically demanding process. For instance, FS4 remarked, “Taekwondo, I hated doing burpees. With karate, I like training, but I hated the tournaments because they are done early in the morning, and I am not a morning person, and for the MMA, I didn’t like all the exercises,” illustrating frustration with the physical conditioning and scheduling demands.

Similarly, FS2 observed, “Boxing was way more controlled than what most people would expect. I wish the boxing was a little more aggressive,” expressing disappointment with the perceived lack of intensity or challenge. FS5 also commented on the rigid structure of some programs, stating, “If I found a place that was not structured or official, with no requirements, yes, I would be willing, as long as I would be allowed to train with no pressure or expectations...,” suggesting that flexibility and autonomy may have improved retention. Collectively, these responses demonstrate that unmet expectations regarding training structure, physical rigor, and social atmosphere often diminished motivation and satisfaction, ultimately leading participants to discontinue martial arts practice.

Theme 5: Systemic and Contextual Barriers. The theme of systemic and contextual barriers encompasses broader life circumstances and institutional challenges that are often beyond the student’s or the school’s direct control, ultimately leading to discontinuation of training. All 10 participants identified at least one issue within this category. Four primary subthemes emerged from the data: school environment and culture; economic and time

constraints; teaching quality and instructor relationships; and psychological barriers. These factors included military relocation, employment changes, major life transitions such as marriage or higher education, and permanent school closures—each of which created obstacles that participants could not easily mitigate. For instance, FS5 explained, “Taekwondo conflicted with Shotokan, and Lau Gar and the other styles were because I was in the Air Force and constantly having to move around, and the instructors had to relocate as well,” illustrating the disruptive impact of frequent relocations.

Similarly, FS9 recalled, “It was a small town, and the gym shut down, so there was no facility to train, so the instructors moved to a new town..., but life got in the way, like college, marriage, etc.,” highlighting how shifting life circumstances and the loss of a local facility contributed to disengagement. FS10 also emphasized the influence of life transitions, stating, “As a kid, probably moving from Albuquerque to here, Oklahoma, and as an adult, I changed jobs.” Collectively, these narratives demonstrate that systemic and contextual barriers—particularly those tied to relocation, financial strain, or significant life events—constituted powerful external forces that limited continuity in martial arts training and ultimately undermined long-term retention.

Research Question 2

What are the perceptions of former martial arts students regarding the role of motivation in sustaining their engagement in martial arts training?

The analysis for Research Question 2 was designed to explore how former students perceived the role of motivation in their continued engagement. NVivo® 15 identified four primary themes that captured these perceptions: (a) Personal and External Life Factors, (b) Challenges and Misaligned Expectations, (c) Intrinsic versus Extrinsic Motivation, and (d)

Perceptions of a Supportive versus Negative Environment. These four themes contained 11 categories and a total of 53 subcategories defining potential retention barriers. The initial thematic focus for this question was on Personal and External Life Factors, as they represented the most prevalent barriers to sustained motivation reported by the participants.

Theme 1: Personal and External Life Factors. This theme encompasses reasons for attrition stemming from an individual's personal choices, changing life circumstances, or environmental constraints beyond the direct control of the martial arts school. All 10 participants cited issues falling under this theme. Two main categories, comprising 12 subcategories, were identified: *Personal Factors* (e.g., burnout and loss of interest, fear and anxiety, injuries, and competing priorities) and *External Factors* (e.g., financial constraints, life events, relocation, and changes in the instructor or school environment). Representative participant quotations illustrate how these personal and situational influences led to the discontinuation of training.

As one former student explained, “As a kid, loss of interest, parental interest, and not wanting to commute...As a kid, I did not like the informal structure” (FS1). Another reflected, “With Greco-Roman wrestling, there were just other things to do. There were sports. I ended up in Rugby. There were other good conditioning things to do” (FS3). For others, external circumstances were decisive: “With the Shotokan, I was forced not to train because one of the assistant instructors changed the training hours... I was in the Air Force and constantly having to move around, and the instructors had to relocate as well” (FS5).

Similarly, one participant shared, “Yes, I have the faint desire to try again, but life got in the way, like college, marriage, etc. I considered jiu-jitsu, but now I have a family and kids” (FS9). Participants described a range of personal and external factors that disrupted training continuity. Shifting priorities, life transitions, and external obligations often outweighed

motivation to persist, demonstrating how everyday realities can override even a strong initial commitment to martial arts practice.

Theme 2: Challenges and Misaligned Expectations. This theme describes the conflict between the student's preferences, goals, or needs (e.g., instructional style, class pace, desired level of intensity) and the reality of the training environment or curriculum. All 10 participants described a challenge or misaligned expectation that negatively affected their motivation to continue training. Four primary categories emerged, containing 12 subcategories: (a) initial motivation versus reality, (b) training and progress, (c) external factors versus intrinsic drive, and (d) social and environmental factors. Subcategories included unrealistic timelines, perceived stagnation, fear and frustration, and negative school culture.

Participants frequently expressed disappointment when the training structure or style failed to meet their expectations. One former student reflected, "Boxing was way more controlled than what most people would expect. I wish the boxing was a little more aggressive" (FS2). Another participant shared, "Taekwondo, I hated doing burpees. With karate, I like training, but I hated the tournaments because they are done early in the morning, and I am not a morning person, and for the MMA, I didn't like all the exercises" (FS4). Similarly, frustration with training balance and equity emerged in the comment, "Sparring bigger/stronger opponents and weaker/lesser opponents...There was a lack of congruence" (FS9). Collectively, these accounts reveal that when training experiences failed to align with initial expectations—whether related to structure, challenge, or culture—participants became disengaged. The perceived gap between anticipated and actual experiences often led to dissatisfaction, reduced motivation, and eventual withdrawal from martial arts training.

Theme 3: Intrinsic versus Extrinsic Motivation. This theme describes the type of motivation that either sustained or failed to sustain engagement, contrasting internal satisfaction with external rewards. All 10 participants provided data related to this theme. Nine subcategories were identified, divided into Intrinsic Motivation (e.g., mastery and skill development, enjoyment and flow state, personal growth, and self-determination) and Extrinsic Motivation (e.g., the belt system and ranking, social recognition and affiliation, external pressure, and tangible rewards). Participants expressed how their motivation evolved, shifting from external achievements to personal fulfillment.

One participant explained, “At the time, receiving a belt rank was the highest happy that I could feel cuz it was something I was striving for...It gave me that backbone of knowing that if I do this, I can do this and get to that new level” (FS2). Another described a more intrinsic focus, noting, “Traditional karate and taekwondo, I could see myself going into to complete a skillset for myself, it would allow me flexibility and a reason to work for...” (FS3). Similarly, others reflected a transition away from external validation: “Rank and having a black belt doesn’t concern me anymore because I know my abilities and where I ended up” (FS5). Finally, one participant summarized the balance between the two sources of motivation, stating, “Not so much rank, but the feeling of accomplishment and having something to show for it” (FS7). Collectively, these responses demonstrate that long-term engagement in martial arts was more effectively sustained by intrinsic motivation than by external rewards or recognition. As participants matured, many shifted from pursuing rank or approval to seeking personal mastery and inner satisfaction, suggesting that intrinsic motivation is a key factor in student retention.

Theme 4: Perceptions of a Supportive vs. Negative Environment. This theme reflects students’ subjective evaluations of the school’s atmosphere, culture, instructor behavior, and

social dynamics, as either encouraging and beneficial (supportive) or toxic and detrimental (negative). All 10 participants provided data for this theme. Three primary categories were identified: (a) instruction and leadership style, (b) peer dynamics and community, and (c) school culture and values. Participants emphasized that the learning environment significantly influenced their motivation and willingness to continue. Positive experiences were often associated with smaller class sizes, structured instruction, and supportive mentorship, while negative experiences involved harsh or egocentric instructors, excessive competition, and a commercialized or impersonal atmosphere.

One participant explained, “For taekwondo, they actually sold their building, and I just never re-instated in their new location as it just didn’t feel the same, and I felt like, ‘Why am I here?’...The atmosphere did a complete 180” (FS2). Another recalled, “I hated that I had the occasional a**hole instructor, the ones who thought their word was law, and that many times I wasn’t at the school long enough to really learn anything worthwhile” (FS5). Conversely, a participant who experienced a more positive setting shared, “MCMAP was structured and small, which I liked...It would have been nice if the taekwondo would have been more structured and smaller classes” (FS6). Collectively, these accounts reveal that a school’s social and instructional climate played a pivotal role in student persistence. Supportive, well-structured environments fostered engagement and belonging, whereas negative or inconsistent cultures often led to frustration and eventual withdrawal from training.

Research Question 3

How do former martial arts students perceive the influence of their engagement on their decision to drop out or continue martial arts training?

Research Question 3 explored how former martial arts students perceived the influence of their engagement on their decision to continue or discontinue training. Analysis of participant interviews revealed three overarching themes: psychological, social and environmental, and life change and external constraints. Collectively, these themes encompassed 11 subcategories identified by NVivo® 15 as potential retention barriers. The subcategories included a shift from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation, managing expectations versus reality, burnout, the student–instructor dynamic, parental influence and fatigue, priorities and lifestyle changes, and financial constraints. These findings suggest that the decision to persist or withdraw from martial arts training is shaped by a complex interplay of internal psychological factors, social relationships within the training environment, and external life circumstances that influence an individual’s capacity to maintain long-term engagement.

Theme 1: Psychological. This theme captures the internal factors, self-perceptions, and emotional states that directly influenced participants’ desire to maintain or discontinue their martial arts training. All 10 participants cited issues under this theme, encompassing five key psychological barriers: a shift from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation; managing expectations versus facing reality; burnout and emotional fatigue; identity and self-perception; and fear of failure or performance anxiety. Participants described how their evolving motivations, self-awareness, and emotional experiences shaped their training trajectories. For instance, one participant expressed regret about not achieving a black belt, noting, “I never managed to get that far, and I regret it...I personally can’t stand being beaten and not getting back up and trying again...I would prefer to go all the way to black” (FS1).

Another reflected on the emotional toll of training, stating, “My main reason was I really didn’t want to hurt people...I got into a mode where I was seeing red all the time, and I would

hurt my sparring partners...I was like, ‘I can’t do this for a living’” (FS3). Similarly, several participants described a change in motivation and self-concept, such as “Rank and having a black belt doesn’t concern me anymore because I know my abilities and where I ended up” (FS5) and “Not so much rank, but the feeling of accomplishment and having something to show for it” (FS7). Collectively, these reflections highlight how shifts in mindset, self-perception, and emotional balance played a pivotal role in determining whether students chose to persist or withdraw from martial arts training.

Theme 2: Social and Environmental. This theme examines the interpersonal dynamics and institutional context within martial arts schools that influenced students’ decisions to continue or discontinue training. All 10 participants described barriers related to this theme, which included three primary categories: the student–instructor dynamic, the role of the martial arts community, and parental influence and fatigue. Participants emphasized how the quality of instruction, the culture of the training environment, and the overall sense of belonging shaped their engagement.

One participant explained, “For taekwondo, they actually sold their building, and I just never re-instated in their new location as it just didn’t feel the same, and I felt like, ‘Why am I here?’...The atmosphere did a complete 180” (FS2). Another reflected on instructional preferences, stating, “I love formal. I am so 100% type A... Teach me a skill and let me replicate that skill until it is in my mind” (FS3). Others described negative experiences with instructors or school culture, such as, “I hated that I had the occasional a**hole instructor, the ones who thought their word was law, and that many times I wasn’t at the school long enough to really learn anything worthwhile...” (FS5), and frustrations with overcrowded or unstructured environments: “The size of the class and training area made for crowded spaces and a cramped

training environment... The structure was aggravating as more time was spent on having fun than learning..." (FS7). Collectively, these accounts reveal how the social atmosphere, teaching quality, and institutional environment played crucial roles in shaping students' satisfaction and long-term commitment to martial arts training.

Theme 3: Life Change and External Constraints. This theme encompasses reasons for discontinuing or maintaining martial arts training stemming from unavoidable external circumstances or resource limitations that interfere with continued engagement. All 10 participants discussed barriers within this category, which included three primary areas: priorities and lifestyle changes, injuries and physical limitations, and financial constraints. Participants frequently described how shifts in personal responsibilities, physical challenges, or economic pressures hindered their ability to sustain training.

One participant reflected on the physical and financial toll of participation, stating, "The pain that came after, the padding was old, so when you were hit, you felt it...And boxing was not very cost-efficient, and running everything, I had saved up dry" (FS2). Another cited practical limitations: "Other schools I had to quit because I didn't have transportation, and for financial reasons, I could not afford the classes" (FS4). Similarly, age and injury emerged as ongoing barriers, as one participant noted, "No, not at an official school where promoting is involved because of my back injury and the fact that I am getting older" (FS5). Others described how evolving life priorities diverted attention away from training: "Yes, I have the faint desire to try again, but life got in the way, like college, marriage, etc. I considered jiu-jitsu, but now have a family and kids" (FS9). Collectively, these reflections illustrate how external factors such as health, finances, and major life transitions exerted significant influence over students' ability to continue martial arts participation despite sustained interest or motivation.

Research Question 4

What strategies and supports do former martial arts students perceive as necessary for maintaining long-term engagement and reducing dropout rates in martial arts training?

Research Question 4 explored what strategies and supports former martial arts students perceived as necessary for maintaining long-term engagement and reducing dropout rates in martial arts training. The analysis of participant interviews identified five primary themes: psychological and motivational factors; social and cultural factors; instructor and training factors; logistical and personal factors; and perceived solutions and supports. Using NVivo® 15, the data revealed 21 potential retention barriers and corresponding strategies across these themes. Key categories included burnout and waning motivation, the gap between initial expectations and training reality, the role of dojo community and belonging, the importance of the instructor–student relationship, and the influence of financial and time constraints. Collectively, these findings highlight that sustaining engagement in martial arts requires not only personal resilience and motivation but also supportive instructional practices, inclusive social environments, and accessible structural conditions that enable consistent participation over time.

Theme 1: Psychological and Motivational Factors. This theme addresses the internal drivers and mental or emotional obstacles that influenced students' engagement and long-term participation in martial arts. All 10 participants contributed data to this theme, which encompassed five key categories: initial expectations versus reality; burnout and waning motivation; mental and emotional resilience; lack of progress; and unclear goals or milestones. Participants described how internal motivation, goal orientation, and psychological well-being shaped their persistence or withdrawal from training. For example, one participant expressed regret over not reaching black belt rank, stating, “I never managed to get that far, and I regret

it...I personally can't stand being beaten and not getting back up and trying again...I would prefer to go all the way to black" (FS1).

Another participant reflected on the motivational value of belt promotion: "At the time, receiving a belt rank was the highest happy that I could feel cuz it was something I was striving for...It gave me that backbone of knowing that if I do this, I can do this and get to that new level" (FS2). Similarly, others noted the psychological and emotional benefits of training, such as "Yes, I am back training. I chose to train again because it helps with my mental health as I need the outlet..." (FS4), and the desire for skill development as a source of motivation: "That would have been a goal....It wasn't a big motivator I guess....I wanted to improve and gain in my skills" (FS10). Collectively, these reflections demonstrate that sustained engagement in martial arts depends heavily on the alignment between personal goals, perceived progress, and the psychological fulfillment derived from training.

Theme 2: Social and Cultural Factors. This theme focuses on the social dynamics, community atmosphere, and relational elements within the martial arts training environment that influenced students' decisions to continue or discontinue training. All 10 participants contributed data to this theme, which encompassed four primary categories: dojo community and belonging, negative experiences or conflict, the role of training partners, and social skills and integration. Participants described how the sense of community—or lack thereof—shaped their engagement and motivation. One participant explained, "For taekwondo, they actually sold their building, and I just never re-instated in their new location as it just didn't feel the same, and I felt like, 'Why am I here?'...The atmosphere did a complete 180" (FS2).

Others cited interpersonal conflicts and leadership issues as barriers to satisfaction and retention, such as, "I hated that I had the occasional a**hole instructor, the ones who thought

their word was law, and that many times I wasn't at the school long enough to really learn anything worthwhile" (FS5), and "Finances were tight, and the instructors were doing and saying bad things on social media, and they went from teaching karate to MMA, which I didn't like and want to do" (FS7). Additionally, some participants noted challenges in connecting socially with others, including differences in age or experience level: "I wish there were more people my age, as I had to pull my punches with people who were younger" (FS10). Collectively, these accounts highlight how social cohesion, instructor conduct, and the cultural tone of the dojo environment play critical roles in fostering long-term engagement and reducing dropout in martial arts training.

Theme 3: Instructor and Training Factors. This theme relates to the quality of instruction, the instructor–student relationship, and the overall physical training atmosphere. All 10 participants contributed data to this theme, which included three primary categories: instructor–student relationship, feedback and correction, and training environment and atmosphere. Participants emphasized that effective instruction, clear communication, and structured training environments were critical to maintaining engagement and satisfaction. For example, one participant highlighted their preference for a formal, skill-based learning style, stating, "I love formal. I am so 100% type A. I am like, 'Teach me a skill and let me replicate that skill until it is in my mind'" (FS3).

Others expressed frustration with aspects of training that felt unproductive or misaligned with their preferences, such as, "Taekwondo, I hated doing burpees... for the MMA, I didn't like all the exercises" (FS4). Similarly, participants valued smaller, more structured settings that fostered personal progress and connection: "MCMAP was structured and small, which I liked...It would have been nice if the taekwondo would have been more structured and smaller

classes” (FS6). Some also noted challenges related to class composition and pacing, as one participant shared, “I always wanted more, but there were people in the class that obviously couldn’t keep up; some of them were younger, but some of them were older” (FS10).

Collectively, these reflections suggest that instructor quality, class structure, and the physical training atmosphere significantly influence student motivation, engagement, and long-term retention in martial arts practice.

Theme 4: Logistical and Personal Factors. This theme focuses on external, unavoidable circumstances that competed with or prevented consistent martial arts training. All 10 participants contributed data to this theme, which encompassed four key categories: “life gets in the way,” financial constraints, time commitment, and injuries or physical discomfort. Participants frequently described how everyday responsibilities, financial burdens, and limited access to facilities disrupted their ability to maintain regular engagement. One participant explained, “The pain that came after, the padding was old, so when you were hit, you felt it...And boxing was not very cost-efficient, and running everything I had saved up dry” (FS2). Another noted how schedule changes and mobility demands interfered with training, stating, “With the Shotokan, I was forced not to train because one of the assistant instructors changed the training hours... Taekwondo conflicted with Shotokan... because I was in the Air Force and constantly having to move around...” (FS5).

Similarly, participants described how competing priorities and travel made sustained participation difficult: “No, with school and constant motorcycle trips across the state, I am too busy to train” (FS7). Others cited environmental limitations and accessibility barriers, as reflected in, “It was a small town and the gym shut down...Travel was not convenient, and there was a lack of other options” (FS9). Collectively, these narratives underscore how practical

constraints—such as finances, mobility, time, and physical capacity—serve as significant barriers to long-term engagement, regardless of motivation or interest.

Theme 5: Perceived Solutions and Supports. This theme synthesizes former students' perspectives on the strategies, resources, and structural supports that could have helped them remain engaged or that might encourage them to return to martial arts training. All 10 participants contributed data to this theme, which encompassed five key categories: flexible training options, effective feedback systems, community-building initiatives, mentorship programs, and managing expectations. Participants emphasized the importance of accessibility, positive instructional experiences, and supportive environments that accommodate individual needs and life circumstances. One participant stated, “If there were a judo school somewhere closer than Tulsa and hours I could hit, I would happily finish that martial art journey and finish the belting” (FS1), highlighting the role of convenience and flexibility.

Others discussed the desire for less rigid or high-pressure environments, such as, “If I found a place that was not structured and official with requirements, yes, I would be willing, as long as I would be allowed to train with no pressure and expectations” (FS5), while another noted the value of structure and class size in promoting motivation: “It would have been nice if the taekwondo would have been more structured and smaller classes” (FS6). Several participants also expressed intentions to pass on the benefits of martial arts to the next generation, as reflected in, “I will definitely enroll my kids in wrestling and other traditional martial arts” (FS9), and others conveyed continued interest in returning to training when circumstances allow: “But yeah, once I get into a stable place again, I will absolutely either join some sort of martial arts gym, either boxing, or MMA, or Muay Thai” (FS10). Collectively, these insights suggest that sustained engagement in martial arts could be enhanced through greater flexibility, stronger

community connections, and instructional approaches that balance structure with individualized support.

Evaluation of the Findings

This section provides an interpretive overview of the significant findings derived from participant interviews, organized according to the study's four guiding research questions. Each set of findings is presented thematically to demonstrate how participants' lived experiences align with and expand upon existing literature and theoretical frameworks. The results are discussed in relation to Victor Vroom's (1964) expectancy theory (ET), which serves as the study's foundational lens for understanding motivation and behavior. Collectively, these findings offer insight into both the initial motivations for joining martial arts and the subsequent barriers that contributed to attrition among former students.

Primary Reasons for Joining a Martial Arts School

This section presents findings related to former students' primary reasons for joining a martial arts school. Using NVivo® 15, five major themes were identified: (a) self-defense and bullying prevention, (b) health and fitness, (c) film, television, and media influence, (d) self-empowerment, and (e) extrinsic or work-related factors. These themes align with Victor Vroom's (1964) expectancy theory (ET), which proposes that motivation results from the relationship among expectancy (the belief that effort leads to performance), instrumentality (the belief that performance leads to outcomes), and valence (the value placed on those outcomes). Applying ET provides a theoretical foundation for understanding how perceived outcomes shape former students' motivation to begin martial arts training.

Self-Defense/Bullying Prevention. Self-defense and bullying prevention emerged as strong, recurring motivations for enrollment. Six of the ten participants reported that protection from physical or emotional harm was their primary reason for joining martial arts. This theme aligns with ET in that motivation increases when individuals believe that training (effort) will effectively improve their ability to defend themselves (performance) and lead to valued safety and confidence outcomes (valence). Several participants described enrolling after experiencing traumatic events such as bullying, abuse, or domestic violence.

As the Wex Definitions Team (2025) defines, self-defense is “the use of force initiated to protect oneself from an attack by another person,” while bullying prevention involves intentional strategies to reduce harm (Center on PBIS, 2025). Addressing all three ET variables is essential for maximizing motivation: focusing solely on skill development (expectancy) without emphasizing personal meaning (valence) or real-world application (instrumentality) may limit engagement (Bateman et al., 2019; Carrier, 2019; Daley et al., 2023; Veenstra et al., 2014; Vroom, 1964; Zboja et al., 2020). This finding supports prior research highlighting self-defense as a core motivator for martial arts participation (Moore et al., 2018).

Health/Fitness. Health and fitness also emerged as primary motivators, cited by four participants. This theme aligns with ET through the expectancy component—individuals believed their effort in training would lead to improved health, strength, and physical ability (Reigeluth & Carr-Chellman, 2009; Vroom, 1964). Participants expressed a desire to become physically fit, improve endurance, and maintain overall well-being. One participant shared that their grandfather encouraged training to improve health and boost confidence, while another sought a way to “move around, be active, and gain muscle.” These findings are consistent with prior studies that have linked martial arts to improvements in balance, cardiovascular health,

flexibility, and agility (Kim et al., 2023; Stamenkovic et al., 2022; Vachovic & Duric, 2024). Within ET, these outcomes represent high valence (personal value), reinforcing the perceived reward of continued participation (Bachrach & Schermerhorn, 2020; Bateman et al., 2019).

Film/TV/Media Influence. Three participants cited media influences—particularly films, television, and social media—as shaping their initial interest in martial arts. Although Vroom’s ET was initially developed for workplace motivation, its framework applies to media influence, as exposure can alter expectancy (self-efficacy beliefs) and valence (perceived value of skill mastery) (Lunenburg, 2011; Subramanian et al., 2020). Two participants referenced The Karate Kid franchise, while another described being inspired by the “Hollywood promise” that anyone can overcome adversity through martial arts. These findings align with research showing that media representations can serve as catalysts for participation, even if long-term engagement later depends on more intrinsic motivators (Jovan et al., 2024; Zadjia, 2023).

Self-Empowerment. Self-empowerment emerged as a significant intrinsic motivator, with three participants describing their desire to build confidence, resilience, and personal control through martial arts. This theme reflects the expectancy variable in ET: belief in one’s ability to succeed increases motivation to engage in effortful tasks (Bateman et al., 2019; Miller, 2024). Participants explained that training offered a sense of control over their circumstances and personal growth, particularly after experiences of powerlessness or abuse. Former Student 9 (FS9) described empowerment as the “one-word summation” of their reason for enrolling. These results are consistent with research linking martial arts to higher self-efficacy, confidence, and perceived mastery (YaNan et al., 2024).

Extrinsic Factor/Work-Related. Two participants identified extrinsic or work-related motivations, such as occupational training in law enforcement or military service, as their

primary reason for participation. This theme aligns with the instrumentality and valence components of ET, in which performance (training) is directly linked to professional rewards or requirements (Vroom, 1964). One participant completed defensive tactics as part of police academy training, while another received martial arts instruction through the Marine Corps Martial Arts Program (MCMAP). Although extrinsic motivators can effectively initiate engagement, research suggests they are less sustainable than intrinsic factors for long-term participation (Borum, 2008; Brown, 2022). This finding underscores the need for martial arts programs to balance external incentives with opportunities for personal growth and internal satisfaction.

Perceptions of Barriers to Retention in Martial Arts

This section addresses Research Question 1, which explored former students' perceptions of the barriers that affect retention in martial arts training. The analysis examined how motivation evolved and identified key factors that influenced these changes. Using NVivo 15®, five major themes were identified: (a) psychological and emotional barriers, (b) environmental and logistical barriers, (c) instructor, school, and cultural barriers, (d) expectation versus reality barriers, and (e) systemic and contextual barriers. Each theme is interpreted through the lens of Victor Vroom's (1964) expectancy theory (ET), which posits that motivation depends on the interaction of three variables—expectancy, instrumentality, and valence (Bateman et al., 2019; Sutton, 2024; Vroom, 1964; Zboja et al., 2020).

Psychological and Emotional Barriers. Psychological and emotional barriers emerged as recurring themes that strongly influenced students' motivation to continue martial arts training. These barriers align with ET, as they can reduce motivation by weakening one or more of its three key variables—expectancy (belief that effort leads to performance), instrumentality (belief that performance leads to outcomes), and valence (the value placed on those outcomes) (Bateman et al., 2019; Vroom, 1964; Sutton, 2024). Nine of the ten participants identified factors such as fear of failure, anxiety, frustration, burnout, and emotional fatigue that negatively affected their motivation and likelihood of continuing.

Vroom's model, expressed as $MF = E \times I \times V$ (Motivational Force = Expectancy \times Instrumentality \times Valence), suggests that if any of these three components are diminished, overall motivation declines (Lunenburg, 2011; Strickland, 2025; Vroom & Deci, 1999). For martial arts students, psychological factors can erode expectancy by reducing confidence in their ability to perform well, leading to fear of testing or perceived inadequacy. Instrumentality can be weakened when students believe their performance will not lead to fair promotion or recognition, often because of perceived favoritism or inconsistent evaluation. Valence—the perceived value of the goal—may decline when emotional distress, burnout, or negative interpersonal experiences reduce the perceived worth of earning a black belt (Sell & Park, 2024; Shang et al., 2025). Participants described barriers such as feeling anxious about sparring, fearing injury to others, or losing enjoyment from repetitive activities like kata. These experiences illustrate how internal emotional factors can undermine expectations and devalue desired outcomes, thereby decreasing overall motivation and increasing the risk of dropout.

Environmental and Logistical Barriers. Environmental and logistical barriers were also prominent across participant responses. These barriers align with ET in that they disrupt the relationship between effort, performance, and reward by introducing external obstacles that make training inconsistent, inaccessible, or inconvenient (Channell, 2021; Sutton, 2024). In this context, expectancy corresponds to the belief that regular training will lead to improvement, instrumentality reflects the belief that improvement will result in tangible rewards (such as belt advancement), and valence represents the personal value placed on those achievements (Bateman et al., 2019; Vroom, 1964).

Environmental and logistical factors, such as limited transportation, inconvenient schedules, unsafe facilities, or financial strain, can weaken these relationships and lower motivation (Boyd & Hartzell, 2023; Brown, 2024; Griffin, 2023). For instance, when access to consistent training is hindered, expectancy is diminished; when unclear requirements or financial stress interfere, instrumentality suffers; and when the training environment feels uninviting or overly commercial, the perceived value—or valence—declines (Grow Pro, 2023; Thakur, 2024).

All 10 participants described environmental challenges that affected their participation. Examples included schedule changes that conflicted with personal responsibilities, curfews that limited class attendance, and the use of worn or outdated equipment. One participant noted that changes to training times during a city-wide curfew prevented them from attending classes, while another expressed frustration with overcrowded facilities. These logistical factors directly constrained effort and access, ultimately reducing motivation to continue.

Instructor, School, and Cultural Barriers. Instructor, school, and cultural barriers were among the most frequently cited challenges and align closely with ET, as they shape students' perceptions of fairness, value, and progress. The theory posits that motivation decreases when students doubt that their effort will lead to successful performance or that their performance will be fairly rewarded (Bateman et al., 2019; Lunenburg, 2011; Vroom, 1964).

Participants described experiences of poor instruction, inconsistent feedback, and negative school cultures that weakened both expectancy and instrumentality. A lack of individualized support or the presence of authoritarian instructors diminished trust in the learning process and reduced perceived fairness in belt advancement (Grow Pro, 2023; Tempo Team, 2025). Cultural issues—such as an aggressive sparring culture or a shift away from traditional values—also reduced valence by lowering the perceived integrity of the training experience (Channel, 2021; Kurt, 2022).

All 10 participants discussed these issues. For instance, FS5 noted frustration with an “occasional a**hole instructor” whose rigid approach made the environment unwelcoming. Another participant described dissatisfaction when their school abandoned a traditional karate curriculum in favor of MMA instruction. Such changes diminished their connection to the art's original purpose and lowered their desire to remain enrolled. These findings converge with prior research emphasizing the importance of perceived fairness, instructor quality, and cultural alignment in sustaining student motivation (Bateman et al., 2019; Grow Pro, 2023; Lunenburg, 2011). However, they diverge from earlier studies that primarily attributed attrition to individual-level factors such as discipline or perseverance (Kurt, 2022; Vroom, 1964), suggesting that environmental and instructional contexts exert equally strong, or even stronger, influences on retention.

Expectation vs. Reality Barriers. Expectation vs. reality barriers arose when students' initial perceptions of martial arts training did not align with their actual experiences. This theme also reflects ET's principles, as unmet expectations undermine the perceived connection between effort and outcome (Bateman et al., 2019; Strickland, 2025; Vroom & Deci, 1999). Many students entered martial arts with media-influenced beliefs about rapid progress, instant skill mastery, and continual excitement. When faced with the discipline, repetition, and time commitment required for advancement, motivation often declined (Kurt, 2022; Nest, 2025).

All ten participants identified some form of expectation-reality gap. Several mentioned frustration with repetitive training, such as constant kata practice, while others expressed disappointment that training did not match their initial image of martial arts. These findings highlight how unrealistic expectations weaken expectancy by linking effort and success, making them seem less attainable, and how disappointment diminishes valence by devaluing the goal of mastery.

Systemic and Contextual Barriers. Systemic and contextual barriers represent external structural or situational factors that interfere with a student's motivation to continue. These include institutional instability, relocation, time constraints, and changes in priorities. Within ET, such barriers disrupt all three motivational components—expectancy, instrumentality, and valence (Bateman et al., 2019; Tempo Team, 2025; Vroom, 1964).

The motivational formula $MF = E \times I \times V$ illustrates how systemic barriers, such as school closures, inconsistent promotion criteria, or relocation, reduce motivation by lowering the perceived connection between effort and outcome. When students move for military or career reasons, expectancy declines because continued effort no longer seems to lead to advancement. Similarly, when institutions close or shift priorities, instrumentality and valence are weakened

because the link between performance and reward becomes uncertain or meaningless (Minosky & Dumoulin, 2023; Reis Da Silva Duarte et al., 2022).

All ten participants described encountering such barriers. Several reported leaving martial arts after relocating for work or military service, while others cited school closures as the direct cause of their disengagement. These findings illustrate how structural instability and contextual changes can dismantle the motivational framework required to sustain long-term engagement in martial arts.

Perceptions Regarding the Role of Motivation

This section addresses Research Question 2, which examined former students' perceptions of the role of motivation in sustaining engagement in martial arts training. The analysis considers how motivation shifted over the course of training and the factors that influenced those changes. Using NVivo 15®, four themes were identified: (a) personal and external life factors, (b) challenges and misaligned expectations, (c) intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation, and (d) perceptions of a supportive versus negative environment. These findings are interpreted through Victor Vroom's (1964) expectancy theory (ET), which posits that motivation reflects the interaction of expectancy (belief that effort leads to performance), instrumentality (belief that performance leads to outcomes), and valence (the value placed on those outcomes) (Bateman et al., 2019; Vroom, 1964; Zboja et al., 2020).

Personal and External Life Factors. Personal and external life factors emerged as salient influences on sustained engagement. Aligned with ET, these factors shape instrumentality and valence by altering the perceived connection between performance and outcomes and the value students assign to those outcomes. When life changes (e.g., relocation, military obligations, scheduling constraints, or financial strain) disrupt access to training, the perceived pathway from

effort to progress to reward weakens, reducing motivation to persist (Carrier, 2019; Channel, 2021). All ten participants cited life circumstances as potential influences; of these, five reported that changes such as moving, curfews when they were minors, or time conflicts contributed to discontinuation, and four referenced cost as a barrier to continued participation.

Challenges and Misaligned Expectations. Challenges and misaligned expectations also influenced motivation. Consistent with ET, motivation declines when students' beliefs about the effort–performance link (expectancy), the performance–outcome link (instrumentality), or the value of the outcome (valence) are not met in practice (Carrier, 2019; Sutton, 2024). New students may overestimate the speed of progress or underestimate the discipline and repetition required to advance, leading to frustration and diminished expectancy (Carrier, 2019; Crag by Wharem, 2025; Williams, 2025). Instrumentality falters when the “reward” of rank does not match inflated expectations (e.g., assuming a black belt confers “movie-level” ability), while valence drops if the belt or other outcomes feel less meaningful than anticipated (Messina, 2025; Sikdar, 2022; Williams, 2025). All ten participants cited such misalignments, including dissatisfaction with school structure, atmosphere, or training content; one noted that a location change caused the atmosphere to do a “complete 180” (FS2).

Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Motivation. Intrinsic and extrinsic motives jointly shaped persistence. Within ET, valence can be driven by external rewards (e.g., rank or recognition) or by internal rewards (e.g., mastery, growth, or enjoyment) (Bateman et al., 2019; Sutton, 2024; Vroom, 1964; Zboja et al., 2020). Motivation is sustained when students believe that effort will improve skill (expectancy), that improvement will be recognized (instrumentality), and that the outcomes—whether extrinsic or intrinsic—are genuinely valuable (valence) (Carrier, 2019; Hoffman-Miller, 2024). All ten participants referenced intrinsic and extrinsic factors, such as

self-improvement, progress, and rank advancement, as well as deterrents (e.g., dislike of specific activities, such as kata/forms) that, when present or absent, influenced the decision to continue or quit.

Perceptions of a Supportive vs. Negative Environment. Perceptions of the training environment directly affected all three components of ET. In supportive settings—characterized by constructive feedback, transparent standards, and a respectful community—students’ expectancy (confidence that effort will pay off) strengthens, instrumentality (belief that performance is fairly rewarded) remains clear, and valence (the value placed on outcomes) increases through belonging and recognition (Glaser, 2023; Sutton, 2024). Conversely, negative climates—marked by harsh criticism, favoritism, inconsistency, or misaligned values—undermine expectancy, blur instrumentality, and erode valence, lowering motivation and raising the likelihood of dropout (Permzadian & Shen, 2024; Sutton, 2024). All ten participants referenced both supportive and negative environmental features, including enjoyment of structured classes as motivators and encounters with unpleasant instructor behavior as deterrents.

The Influence of Engagement and the Decision to Drop Out

This section addresses Research Question 3, which examined how former students perceived the influence of their engagement on their decision to drop out of or continue martial arts training. The analysis explores how motivation evolved during training and the key factors that influenced these changes. Using NVivo® 15, three primary themes were identified: (a) psychological, (b) social and environmental, and (c) life change and external constraints. These findings are interpreted through Victor Vroom’s (1964) expectancy theory (ET), which proposes that motivation results from the interaction of three variables—expectancy (belief that effort leads to performance), instrumentality (belief that performance leads to outcomes), and valence

(the value placed on those outcomes) (Bateman et al., 2019; Carrier, 2019; Sutton, 2024; Vroom, 1964; Zboja et al., 2020).

Psychological. Psychological factors emerged as significant influences on engagement and retention. This theme aligns with ET's explanation of why many individuals discontinue martial arts training before earning a black belt. Motivation declines when individuals doubt that effort will yield improved performance (expectancy), that performance will lead to meaningful outcomes (instrumentality), or that the outcomes retain personal value (valence). Personal and external factors influence all three variables.

For the expectancy variable, self-efficacy—or belief in one's ability—may be weakened by failures, such as failing a belt test or struggling with complex techniques. When individuals believe continued effort will not result in success, motivation decreases (Carrier, 2019; Channel, 2021). External factors, such as demanding work schedules, long commutes, or financial strain, can similarly limit time and energy for training, further reducing expectancy (Carrier, 2019; Sutton, 2024).

Regarding instrumentality, motivation can decline when personal values or external conditions alter the perceived link between performance and reward. If personal priorities shift toward family or other commitments, the black belt may lose its perceived worth. Likewise, unfair promotion policies, inconsistent evaluation, or injuries can disrupt the performance-outcome relationship, leading students to doubt that achievement is possible (Carrier, 2019; Glaser, 2023; Williams, 2025).

For valence, the importance placed on outcomes often changes with time. A child motivated by prestige may, as a teen, value friendships or other activities more (Craig by Wharem, 2025; Glaser, 2023). Similarly, adults may devalue the black belt when career or

family obligations take precedence (Channel, 2021; McLarty et al., 2021). All 10 participants cited psychological shifts as factors in quitting, including loss of interest, fear of harming others, or emotional fatigue. One participant also cited an external factor—employment changes—that reduced training opportunities.

Social and Environmental. Social and environmental influences also played a pivotal role in sustaining or undermining motivation. This theme aligns with ET, as these factors affect all three motivational variables (Hoffman-Miller, 2024; Sutton, 2024). For expectancy, social factors such as instructor feedback, peer support, and overall encouragement shape a student's belief that effort leads to improvement. Supportive instruction enhances expectancy, while limited attention or negative feedback erodes it (Gong et al., 2022; Nagano, 2025). Regarding instrumentality, students' perceptions of fairness and transparency in promotions affect whether they believe strong performance yields desired rewards. Perceived favoritism or inconsistent standards can weaken instrumentality and lower commitment (Carrier, 2019; Glaser, 2023; Nagano, 2025; Williams, 2025). For valence, community culture determines how much students value the outcome itself. Schools fostering camaraderie and respect elevate the meaning of advancement (Nagano, 2025).

Environmental conditions mirror these patterns. Quality facilities, structured curricula, and clear policies increase expectancy and instrumentality by reinforcing the effort-performance-reward link (Gong et al., 2022; Kurt, 2022; Nagano, 2025). A positive dojo culture enhances valence by associating rank with pride and a sense of belonging. All 10 participants described social or environmental influences in their decisions to quit, including dissatisfaction with the atmosphere, cramped training spaces (FS7), inconsistent instruction quality, and poor interactions with instructors.

Life Change and External Constraints. Life changes and external constraints also strongly influenced participants' engagement decisions. This theme aligns with ET, which conceptualizes motivation as a product of expectancy, instrumentality, and valence (Carrier, 2019; Glaser, 2023; Sutton, 2024; Tempo Team, 2025). For expectancy, events such as new jobs, parenthood, or aging reduced participants' belief that effort would lead to improved performance. Limited time or physical capacity diminished their confidence that training could yield progress (Carrier, 2019; Lloyd & Mertens, 2018; Tempo Team, 2025). For instrumentality, shifting life priorities or financial burdens disrupted the perceived connection between effort and reward. Even when students performed well, expenses related to tuition, testing, or travel sometimes prevented advancement, weakening motivation (Carrier, 2019; Sutton, 2024). For valence, the personal value of earning a black belt decreased when other goals—such as family stability or career advancement—became more important. The loss of intrinsic enjoyment or reduced emphasis on external recognition further diminished motivation (Carrier, 2019; Scorgie, 2025).

All 10 participants cited life changes and external constraints that affected retention. Common factors included financial limitations, relocation, transportation challenges, and school closures. One participant mentioned that their school had relocated; two others stated that their schools had closed entirely, forcing them to discontinue their training.

Strategies and Supports Needed to Sustain Engagement

This section addresses Research Question 4, which examined which strategies and supports former martial arts students perceived as necessary to maintain long-term engagement and reduce dropout rates in martial arts training. The analysis explores how students' motivation changed over the course of their training and identifies the leading factors that may have

influenced those changes. Using NVivo 15®, five major themes were identified: (a) psychological and motivational factors, (b) social and cultural factors, (c) instructor and training factors, (d) logistical and personal factors, and (e) perceived solutions and supports. These findings are interpreted through Victor Vroom's (1964) expectancy theory (ET), which proposes that motivation is a function of three key components—expectancy (the belief that effort leads to performance), instrumentality (the belief that performance leads to a desired outcome), and valence (the value placed on that outcome) (Bateman et al., 2019; Sutton, 2024; Vroom, 1964; Zboja et al., 2020).

Psychological and Motivational Factors. Psychological and motivational factors emerged as key influences on sustained engagement and dropout. This theme aligns with ET, which offers a structured explanation for how individuals lose motivation when expectancy, instrumentality, or valence weakens. Expectancy represents the belief that effort will lead to improved performance; instrumentality represents the belief that performance will be rewarded; and valence reflects the value placed on those rewards, whether intrinsic (e.g., self-esteem, mastery) or extrinsic (e.g., rank, recognition) (Carrier, 2019; Channel, 2021; Glaser, 2023; Scorgie, 2025; Sutton, 2024; Williams, 2025). This framework has been consistently supported across domains such as education, sports, and workplace performance, where fluctuations in expectancy and valence have been linked to persistence and attrition (Channel, 2021; Sutton, 2024). The present findings extend this pattern into martial arts training, demonstrating that similar motivational dynamics shape long-term engagement.

At the beginning of training, expectancy tends to be high as students believe their enthusiasm and effort will translate into rapid progress. Over time, as training becomes more demanding and skill acquisition slows, expectancy may drop—particularly if students experience

plateaus or insufficient feedback (Glaser, 2023; Nest, 2025). Instructors play a pivotal role in reinforcing this variable by helping students connect effort with improvement; unclear or inconsistent feedback weakens expectancy. This finding converges with Glaser (2023), who reported that perceived feedback quality significantly mediates expectancy levels in skill-based learning contexts. Similarly, Nest (2025) found that when learners cannot trace progress to effort, motivational decline is likely—echoing the participant experiences observed in this study.

Instrumentality often declines when students perceive unfairness or a lack of recognition for their performance. Some lose motivation after earning a new belt because they feel directionless afterward, while others quit before promotion tests due to anxiety or fear of failure (Carrier, 2019; Glaser, 2023; Nest, 2025). This pattern mirrors findings in Carrier (2019) and Glaser (2023), both of whom identified that inconsistent reward structures or unclear performance contingencies undermine perceived instrumentality. The present results reinforce those conclusions by showing that even symbolic rewards, such as belts, may lose meaning without clear goal continuity.

Finally, valence can shift as students' life priorities change. External demands, such as work or family, may lower the perceived worth of achieving a black belt. Those driven mainly by extrinsic rewards, such as belt color, are more likely to disengage once the novelty fades, whereas students motivated by intrinsic rewards—growth, mastery, or belonging—tend to remain committed (Carrier, 2019; Hoffman-Miller, 2024; Nest, 2025). This convergence with Hoffman-Miller (2024) reinforces the broader consensus that intrinsic motivation predicts endurance in long-term pursuits, while extrinsic motives correlate with early dropout. The alignment between these studies underscores the stability of valence as a predictor of sustained engagement across learning contexts.

All 10 participants cited life psychological and motivational factors as reasons for their decisions to quit. These reasons included a lack of intrinsic motivation, unmet goals, a need for recognition, and a decline in self-efficacy. One participant stated that “accolades are huge” (FS3). Taken together, these findings strongly align with existing expectancy theory research, extend it to a martial arts context, and suggest that the exact cognitive-motivational mechanisms identified in academic and athletic environments are also central to persistence in skill-based physical training.

Social and Cultural Factors. Social and cultural factors as motivators for joining a martial arts school are a theme supported by the data. The theme aligns with Victor Vroom’s 1964 expectancy theory (ET), which explains that an individual's motivation to perform a specific behavior is based on the expectation that the behavior will lead to a desired outcome valued by the individual. Social and cultural factors can significantly impact each of the three variables of this theory: expectancy, instrumentality, and valence. Social and cultural factors can significantly impact these three variables (Bateman et al., 2019; Sutton, 2024; Vroom, 1964; Zboja et al., 2020).

Expectancy, social comparison, and cultural norms influence a student’s belief in their ability to succeed. If a dojo’s environment fosters excessive competition or unrealistic standards, expectancy drops. Supportive relationships—with instructors, peers, and family—enhance confidence and increase expectancy, whereas social isolation or judgmental peers weaken it (Permzadian & Shen, 2024).

Instrumentality depends heavily on trust and fairness. When students perceive that promotions are influenced by favoritism or inconsistency, the link between performance and

outcome breaks down, reducing motivation (Carrier, 2019; Glaser, 2023; Sutton, 2024). Conversely, transparent and merit-based advancement strengthens instrumentality.

The cultural meaning of the black belt and peer norms within the martial arts community influences valence. In cultures or schools where rank carries high prestige, students place greater value on achievement. However, if peers quit or the dojo's reputation declines, the perceived value of progress may diminish (Craig by Wharem, 2025; Hoffman-Miller, 2024; Nest, 2025).

All 10 participants cited life social and cultural factors as reasons for their decisions to quit. These reasons included negative social dynamics, such as the occasional, not-so-pleasant instructor, and conflicting values, such as an aversion to violence. One participant stated that they hated dealing with instructors who felt that what they did and said was law, whereas another stated that he was afraid of hurting others during sparring.

Instructor and Training Factors. Instructor and training factors were central to participants' decisions to continue or discontinue training. Aligned with ET (also known as the VIE model), these factors directly shape expectancy, instrumentality, and valence (Nest, 2025; Sutton, 2024). Instructors have a strong influence on expectancy by providing structure, feedback, and achievable goals. Supportive teaching reinforces students' belief that consistent effort leads to progress, whereas vague or overly complex instruction weakens it. A lack of quality equipment, unclear goals, or poor organization can further lower expectancy (Tempo Team, 2025). In terms of instrumentality, instructors control the reward system. When promotion is consistent and merit-based, students trust that high performance will be recognized. Perceived favoritism or unfulfilled promises break this link and reduce motivation (Carrier, 2019; Tempo Team, 2025). Finally, valence depends on how instructors frame both the journey and the

rewards. Recognizing individual goals—such as fitness, discipline, or self-confidence—enhances the personal value of continued participation (Carrier, 2019; Shang et al., 2023).

All 10 participants cited life instructor and training factors as reasons for their decisions to quit. These reasons included dissatisfaction with the instructional style: some believed it was too structured, while others felt it was not structured enough. Another participant expressed dissatisfaction with the instructors' behavior and said they were doing and saying things on social media that they believed did not reflect the moral values they expected from the instructors.

Logistical and Personal Factors. Logistical and personal factors represent external challenges that restrict engagement. This theme aligns with ET by illustrating how barriers such as time, cost, or physical limitations weaken expectancy, instrumentality, and valence (Carrier, 2019; Channel, 2021; Hoffman-Miller, 2024; Sutton, 2024; Zboja et al., 2020). Expectancy declines when time or financial pressures prevent consistent attendance, making effort seem futile. Instrumentality is weakened when injuries or personal struggles disrupt the connection between effort and achievement. Valence declines when shifting priorities—such as work, family, or health—reduce the perceived worth of earning rank or continuing training (Hoffman-Miller, 2024; Nest, 2025).

All 10 participants cited logistical and personal factors as reasons for their decisions to quit. These reasons included physical limitations, financial constraints, and a lack of accessible facilities. A couple of participants mentioned they had to quit because the school closed, whereas others cited financial constraints, and one said a new job got in the way of training.

Perceived Solutions and Supports. Perceived solutions and supports as motivators for joining a martial arts school are a theme supported by the data. The theme aligns with Victor Vroom's 1964 expectancy theory (ET), as a martial arts student's motivation to continue training for a black belt is a function of the three variables: expectancy, instrumentality, and valence. The research theme of perceived solutions and supports maps directly onto these three variables (Hoffman-Miller, 2024; Sutton, 2024).

To reinforce expectancy, participants emphasized the importance of structured, transparent progress paths and clear milestones. Programs that outline attainable steps toward black belt advancement and provide consistent feedback promote a high-expectancy environment (Tempo Team, 2025). For instrumentality, students stressed fairness and trust. Transparent promotion systems and consistent instructor follow-through ensure that hard work is recognized and rewarded, maintaining belief in the performance-outcome link (Carrier, 2019; Tempo Team, 2025). Valence increases when schools highlight both intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. Emphasizing personal growth, confidence, and belonging, along with external recognition, enhances the perceived value of the training journey (Channel, 2021; Shang et al., 2023; Sutton, 2024). Supportive peer networks, flexible scheduling, and affordable pricing further elevate motivation by aligning school structure with students' practical needs.

All 10 participants cited logistical and personal factors as reasons for their decisions to quit. These reasons included flexible training options, affordable classes, and convenient location and training hours. A couple of participants mentioned financial constraints that limited their ability to train. Another former student mentioned that the school changed locations, and they had to quit due to the inconvenience and the inability to travel.

Summary

This chapter presented the comprehensive findings of a qualitative narrative study of former martial arts students who quit training before earning the rank of black belt. Chapter 4 examined former students' perceptions of barriers to retention and identified strategies and supports that would have promoted sustained engagement and motivation during their training. The chapter included a detailed discussion of data trustworthiness, the results of the thematic analysis, and a concluding evaluation of the findings. The discussion below provides a high-level synthesis of these results.

The initial findings focused on the motivations that compelled 10 former students to enroll in martial arts training. The analysis identified five distinct, sometimes overlapping themes, revealing a complex set of internal and external drivers of enrollment. The most dominant motivation, cited by six participants, was the need for self-defense/bullying prevention. This included one participant who sought self-protection and five who cited traumatic events—such as childhood abuse or domestic violence—as catalysts for training. This strong link between trauma and enrollment suggests that, for former students, martial arts were viewed less as recreation and more as an essential tool for personal safety and empowerment. Furthermore, the analysis suggested that for these skills to be practical, training programs must successfully address all three variables of Vroom's expectancy theory (ET)—expectancy (belief that effort builds skill), valence (perceived importance of the outcome), and instrumentality (confidence that skills will function in real-world contexts)—to sustain motivation and belief in one's ability to defend against future threats (Bateman et al., 2019; Vroom, 1964).

Strong secondary themes included health/fitness (N = 4), driven by a desire to counter sedentary work and improve physical well-being, and self-empowerment (N = 3), articulated as a

desire for self-improvement and reclaiming personal agency. Less frequent yet notable motivations included film/television/media influence (N = 3), in which the allure of Hollywood's portrayal of martial arts (e.g., The Karate Kid franchise) inspired enrollment. The final theme was extrinsic factors/work-related requirements (N = 2), which involved mandatory training in professional contexts (e.g., law enforcement or the Marine Corps Martial Arts Program).

This chapter also presented emergent themes related to former students' experiences during training and the specific factors that ultimately led them to quit before achieving the rank of black belt. The analysis identified three overarching themes, with all 10 participants citing factors associated with each. These factors were derived from responses to 26 open-ended questions, each of which addressed all four research questions.

The first major category was psychological and emotional barriers (N = 10). These internal factors included changes in intrinsic motivation (e.g., loss of interest or intrinsic focus) and emotional obstacles (e.g., fear of unintentionally harming others during sparring). Additional influences included diminished self-efficacy, unmet psychological goals, and a strong need for recognition (e.g., "accolades are huge," FS3).

The second category was expectations-versus-reality barriers (N = 10), reflecting misalignment between participants' anticipated training experience and the delivered program. Participants cited dissatisfaction with training content—particularly excessive kata/form practice—along with concerns about the instructional environment and staff. Accounts included negative social dynamics, encounters with authoritarian instructors who believed their word was "law" (FS5), and perceived inconsistencies between instructors' public social media behavior and the moral values expected of the school.

The third category was systemic and contextual barriers (N = 10), focusing on unavoidable external constraints and life changes. Logistical factors were prominent, with two participants citing relocations for military service or new employment and two others citing financial constraints. Most critically, four participants reported complete school closures, and two noted that a change in school location or atmosphere (a “complete 180,” FS2) created an unappealing environment that necessitated withdrawal.

In conclusion, the findings indicate that although former students possessed strong initial motivations, particularly those rooted in trauma and self-defense, these factors alone were insufficient to overcome the compounding barriers identified across psychological, instructional, and logistical domains that ultimately led to attrition. The next chapter will shift the focus from the presentation of these findings to the interpretation and discussion of emergent themes, connecting the study’s results to the existing literature on martial arts retention and providing actionable recommendations and alternatives for martial arts organizations.

Chapter 5: Implications, Recommendations, and Conclusions

A central concern for many martial arts organizations is attracting and retaining students (Núñez-Barriopedro et al., 2021). Research on motivation and engagement within martial arts and combat sports remains limited and often focuses on a single discipline or style. Addressing this gap requires understanding the underlying motivations that influence participation and persistence (Reis Da Silva Duarte et al., 2022; Silva & Quaresma, 2019). The problem addressed in this study was that the lack of effective strategies for fostering motivation and engagement among beginner martial arts students contributes to high dropout rates, which in turn undermines the long-term educational and personal benefits of martial arts training (Biscaia et al., 2021; Cynarski, 2019; Kim & Zhang, 2019; Ko & Kim, 2010; Silva & Quaresma, 2019). The purpose of this qualitative narrative study was to explore former martial arts students' perceptions of barriers to retention and to identify strategies and supports that would promote sustained engagement and motivation in training. This issue is important because prior research has found that participants who report higher levels of perceived service quality in sports and fitness settings also demonstrate greater satisfaction and long-term commitment (Freitas & Lacerda, 2019; Kim et al., 2021).

A qualitative design using semi-structured, one-on-one interviews was employed to investigate the motivations of former martial arts students. Each interview included a predetermined set of open-ended questions. The interviews captured detailed insights into participants' perceptions of what sustained or diminished their motivation to continue martial arts training and why they chose to discontinue before attaining the rank of black belt or higher.

Participants were recruited through Facebook groups, word-of-mouth referrals, and strategically placed flyers in Bartlesville and Tulsa, Oklahoma. Eligibility criteria required

participants to be at least 18 years old, to have prior martial arts or combat sports experience, and to have stopped training before achieving a black belt or equivalent rank. Interview questions (Appendix A) were aligned with the study's overarching research questions, and the interview protocol was developed and approved by the IRB. Member checking was used to enhance credibility. Interviews were conducted either in person at mutually agreed-upon locations or via Google Meet. Sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed by me, and each participant reviewed and verified their transcript for accuracy. Responses were analyzed for key statements, coded for patterns and similarities, and organized into themes using NVivo 15®. All data were de-identified, and pseudonyms were assigned to ensure confidentiality.

An exploratory narrative design provided a framework for understanding why individuals prematurely end their martial arts training and which factors influence retention. Inductive analysis allowed me to interpret the data from the bottom up, identifying patterns and themes grounded in participants' lived experiences, free from the bias of preconceived assumptions (Fariba, 2016). Thematic analysis revealed a complex model of martial arts attrition rooted in the disconnect between strong initial motivations and the compounding barriers encountered during training. Initially, participants reported compelling motivations for enrollment, with the most dominant theme being the need for self-defense and bullying prevention (N = 6). A majority of these participants cited a history of trauma, such as childhood abuse or domestic violence, as the catalyst for seeking training, suggesting that martial arts was viewed not merely as recreation but as an essential tool for personal safety and empowerment.

However, these strong initial motivations were insufficient to sustain engagement over time. The analysis identified three overarching and compounding categories that contributed to attrition: a) Psychological and Emotional Barriers (N = 10): Internal factors such as loss of

intrinsic motivation, fear of unintentionally harming others during sparring, and an unmet need for recognition; b) Expectations-Versus-Reality Barriers (N = 10): Misalignment between anticipated and actual training experiences, including dissatisfaction with excessive kata/form practice and negative instructional dynamics involving authoritarian instructors; c) Systemic and Contextual Barriers (N = 10): External constraints such as financial hardship, job or military relocation, and, most critically, complete school closures or significant changes in training atmosphere. These results indicate that although former students possessed deeply rooted motivations, their retention ultimately failed due to a convergence of internal, instructional, and external factors that schools did not adequately address.

Narrative case studies in qualitative research have several well-documented limitations, including potential subjectivity in interpretation, challenges in establishing transferability, concerns about memory accuracy, and the possibility of researcher bias (Al-Saraf, 2023; Priya & Ambedkar, 2021). The small number of participants also limits transferability, and data saturation can lead to repetitive responses (Jones, 2023). Conducting one-on-one interviews helped mitigate these issues by allowing deeper individual exploration. Another limitation was the sensitivity of some topics; participants occasionally shared personal experiences involving trauma or abuse. Additionally, martial arts school owners were often reluctant to release client contact information, emphasizing the need for strict confidentiality.

These limitations were mitigated through methodological rigor, including audio recordings (with consent), a well-defined interview guide, and participant member checking to validate findings. Additional strategies included the use of thick description to provide contextual richness, triangulation of data sources, and transparent acknowledgment of potential researcher bias (Ahmed, 2024). Reflexivity (also known as bracketing) was practiced throughout

the research process to ensure that personal assumptions did not unduly influence interpretation. This involved my continual self-examination of potential biases and their effects on the analysis—a dynamic, ongoing process considered essential to qualitative rigor (Burnham, 2023; Hecker & Kalpokas, 2025; McLeod, 2024; Olmos-Vega, 2022). This chapter includes an introduction that restates the problem and purpose, provides an overview of the methodology and findings, and outlines the study’s limitations. The subsequent sections present implications for practice, address the research questions, offer recommendations for future research, and conclude with a summary of the study’s key contributions to the understanding of martial arts student retention.

Implications

This section discusses the study’s findings in relation to the original four research questions (RQs) and the established literature, providing the contextual foundation for the study’s conclusions and subsequent recommendations. The results are discussed in the context of the study, describing the extent to which they address the research problem and purpose, while also contributing to the existing literature and the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 2. The discussion evaluates the consistency of the results with previous research and theory and offers potential explanations for unexpected or divergent findings. Finally, this section identifies the most significant implications of the study—both positive and negative—for martial arts organizations and broader societal outcomes.

Implications Related to Research Question 1: Perceived Barriers to Retention

This subsection explores the findings related to perceived barriers that influenced participants’ decisions to discontinue martial arts training before achieving the rank of black belt. Drawing on participants’ personal narratives, the findings illustrate how psychological,

instructional, and environmental factors interacted to shape their overall training experiences. These lived experiences reflect the complex and multidimensional nature of attrition within martial arts settings.

The findings indicate that perceptions of retention barriers were not singular but compounding and interrelated. Narratives from all participants (N = 10) revealed that attrition resulted from the simultaneous influence of psychological and emotional barriers, expectations-versus-reality discrepancies, and systemic or contextual constraints. This complexity directly addresses the study's problem by demonstrating that retention strategies must be holistic rather than narrowly focused on logistical or financial concerns (Biscaia et al., 2021).

Psychological barriers—particularly loss of self-efficacy and fear of unintentionally harming others—suggest that martial arts environments can inadvertently contribute to the same emotional distress students initially sought to alleviate. This finding extends existing sport attrition literature by highlighting the distinctive emotional challenges associated with combat sports (Cynarski, 2019). When psychological barriers intersect with instructional and systemic issues, students may experience a cumulative erosion of motivation that accelerates withdrawal.

Implications Related to Research Question 2: The Role of Motivation in Sustained Engagement

This subsection examines how motivation influenced participants' ongoing engagement or disengagement with martial arts training. The findings indicate that motivation was dynamic rather than static, shifting over time in response to instructional practices, perceived progress, and alignment between expectations and outcomes. These shifts played a central role in determining whether participants persisted or withdrew from training.

The results reveal a critical disconnect between strong initial motivation and sustained engagement. For most participants, the dominant motivation for enrollment was self-defense, often rooted in personal trauma (N = 6), reflecting high valence within Vroom's (1964) expectancy theory (ET). However, dissatisfaction with training content—particularly the emphasis on repetitive kata or form practice—undermined both expectancy and instrumentality, as participants questioned whether their effort would lead to meaningful skill acquisition and real-world applicability (Bateman et al., 2019; Vroom, 1964).

These findings suggest that sustaining motivation requires more than deeply personal reasons for enrollment. Instructional programs must continually reinforce the perceived connection between effort, skill development, and meaningful outcomes. When this connection weakens, even high-stakes motivations may be insufficient to prevent attrition.

Implications Related to Research Question 3: Influence of Engagement on Dropout Decisions

This subsection explores how the level and quality of participant engagement influenced decisions to continue or discontinue martial arts training. Engagement emerged as both a behavioral and emotional construct shaped by instructional style, peer relationships, and perceived belonging. Participants' narratives demonstrated that engagement often served as the tipping point between persistence and withdrawal.

The findings indicate that engagement within the instructional and social environment was a direct determinant of dropout decisions. Participants described negative social dynamics and authoritarian instructional approaches as particularly disengaging. These findings align with prior research indicating that higher perceived service quality contributes to greater satisfaction and retention in sport and fitness contexts (Freitas & Lacerda, 2019).

This study further extends the literature by suggesting that traditional authoritarian pedagogy—long considered a defining characteristic of martial arts culture—may function as a barrier to engagement for contemporary beginner students. The qualitative design allowed participants to articulate sensitive interpersonal experiences that may be overlooked in quantitative research. These insights underscore the importance of engagement as a relational and emotionally grounded process.

Implications for Research Question 4: Perceived Strategies and Supports Necessary for Maintaining Long-Term Engagement

This subsection addresses participants' perceptions of the strategies and supports necessary to sustain long-term engagement in martial arts training. The findings emphasize the importance of instructional adaptability, emotional safety, and organizational reliability. Participants consistently identified these factors as critical to maintaining motivation over time.

Participants highlighted the need for curriculum relevance, empathetic instruction, and consistent institutional support. Given that many participants' motivations were rooted in trauma, effective retention strategies must extend beyond traditional customer service models to incorporate trauma-informed pedagogical approaches. These approaches emphasize mentorship, psychological safety, and recognition of progress and effort.

At a broader level, the findings suggest that martial arts organizations have the potential to function not only as training facilities but also as environments for empowerment, resilience-building, and personal growth. When these supports are absent, schools risk losing students who stand to benefit most from sustained participation. Addressing these needs may lead to improved retention and more meaningful long-term outcomes.

Recommendations for Practice

The findings of this qualitative narrative study reveal a critical gap in retention strategies for sustaining student participation in martial arts programs. Current strategies often fail to account for students' unique, frequently trauma-related motivations and the compounding nature of attrition barriers. The following recommendations are derived directly from the thematic analysis and are intended for martial arts school owners, instructors, and governing organizations. The applicability of these findings is limited to the context of beginner-level student retention in martial arts and combat sports.

1. Implement Trauma-Informed Instructional Practices

Recommendation: Martial arts organizations should adopt trauma-informed pedagogical shifts by replacing hierarchical, authoritarian instruction with supportive and non-judgmental mentoring. The instruction should emphasize empathy and show that the instructor was once in the student's shoes. This recommendation comes from the following:

Support: The study found that authoritarian instructors and negative social dynamics were key components of the Expectations vs. Reality Barrier (Addressing RQ3). This style is directly contradictory to the needs of the segment of students (N=6) whose enrollment was motivated by a need for empowerment following personal trauma.

Literature context: This approach aligns with broader principles in sports psychology that emphasize the critical role of instructor rapport in fostering intrinsic motivation (Cynarski, 2019) and extends them to propose that instruction should actively mitigate psychological distress rather than reinforce it.

2. Prioritize Practical Self-Defense and Curricular Relevance

Recommendation: The curriculum for beginner students must be restructured to continually affirm the instrumental and practical utility of the skills being taught, thus ensuring direct alignment between the training content and student expectations. This will help to build essential life skills, foster empowerment and resilience, and improve physical and mental well-being. This recommendation is supported by the following:

Support: The dominant motivation for enrollment was self-defense (N=6), but participants cited dissatisfaction with excessive, unappealing kata/form practice as a primary factor in attrition (Addressing RQ2). The disconnect compromised the students' expectancy and instrumentality within Vroom's expectancy theory (ET) framework (Bateman et al., 2019; Vroom, 1964), leading to a loss of intrinsic drive.

Literature context: By focusing on practical applications, schools can bridge the gap between initial high valence (the importance of self-defense) and perceived instrumentality (the utility of the training), thereby sustaining the motivation that brings students through the door. This addresses the high dropout rates cited in the existing literature (Ko & Kim, 2010; Silva & Quaresma, 2019).

3. Develop Systemic Reliability and Contingency Planning

Recommendation: School owners must anticipate and proactively mitigate Systemic and Contextual Barriers by developing official contingency plans for inevitable external factors that often lead to student attrition. Adelman & Taylor (2017) and O'Conner (2025) suggested that having a plan in place will help prepare for unexpected disruptions, manage crises, and continue operations as usual by proactively responding rather than reacting. This recommendation is supported by the following:

Support: The study found that external factors accounted for a significant portion of attrition, with six participants citing a school closure or an undesirable change in school location/atmosphere as the cause for withdrawal (Addressing RQ1).

Literature context: While existing literature acknowledges logistical barriers (Biscaia et al., 2021), this finding underscores the need for proactive business continuity plans to ensure students are not forced out by school-level volatility. Schools should explore arrangements with nearby organizations or provide virtual resources to protect the students' ongoing training investment.

4. Provide Emotional and Recognition Support for Beginners

Recommendation: Instructors must be trained to recognize and address the Psychological and Emotional Barriers specific to beginner martial arts students, particularly the fear of injury and the strong need for recognition. This suggestion aligns with the first, in which the instructor demonstrates empathy and understanding for what the student is experiencing and feels. This is supported by the following:

Support: All participants (N=10) cited factors within the Psychological and Emotional Barrier category, including the loss of intrinsic focus and an explicit need for recognition (accolades are "huge" for FS3) (Addressing RQ1 and RQ3).

Literature context: This recommendation moves beyond general customer satisfaction (Freitas & Lacerda, 2019) to focus on the unique emotional toll of combat sports. Providing structured, frequent, and authentic recognition (such as specific feedback and small, achievable awards) helps beginners solidify their self-efficacy. It prevents the feeling of inadequacy that contributes to psychological withdrawal.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the framework, findings, and implications of this qualitative narrative study, several directions for future research emerge that would allow scholars to build upon and extend the current findings. This study identified a multidimensional model of martial arts attrition shaped by psychological and emotional barriers, expectations-versus-reality discrepancies, and systemic constraints. Participants frequently described deeply personal motivations for enrollment—particularly self-defense needs rooted in prior trauma—yet reported that these motivations eroded over time when instructional practices, curricular relevance, or organizational stability failed to meet expectations. Future research should continue to examine how motivation, engagement, and instructional design interact over time, particularly within the context of beginner-level martial arts participation. For example, one participant explained that self-defense training was sought because “I needed to feel safe again,” yet later described feeling discouraged when training emphasized repetitive forms rather than practical application. Quantitative or mixed-methods studies could test the prevalence of these experiences across larger and more diverse populations, thereby strengthening the generalizability of the retention model proposed in this study.

Given the limitations of this qualitative narrative design, future researchers are encouraged to employ methodological approaches that address issues of transferability, scope, and temporal depth. The current study relied on retrospective accounts from a small, geographically concentrated sample of former students, which may be influenced by memory recall and contextual specificity. Longitudinal designs that follow students from initial enrollment through multiple stages of training could provide real-time insight into how motivation and engagement evolve and identify the precise points at which attrition risk

increases. Additionally, quasi-experimental or comparative studies examining instructional pedagogy—such as trauma-informed, mentorship-based approaches versus traditional authoritarian models—could empirically test the instructional factors participants identified as disengaging. One participant described an instructor as acting “like he was the law,” suggesting that perceived authoritarianism may undermine psychological safety and belonging. Future studies that systematically evaluate instructional climate, self-efficacy, and retention outcomes would directly address this limitation.

The next logical step in this line of research is to move beyond identifying barriers to documenting effective retention strategies across different martial arts contexts. Comparative studies examining adult versus youth populations, grappling-based versus traditional striking arts, or U.S.-based programs versus international systems with institutionalized martial arts training would offer valuable insight into how cultural, developmental, and systemic factors influence persistence. Additionally, qualitative studies focused on practitioners who successfully attained and maintained black belt rank could illuminate the motivational sustainment strategies that enable long-term engagement despite the same barriers identified in this study. Collectively, these future research directions would advance the field from problem identification toward evidence-based solutions, supporting the development of martial arts programs that foster sustained participation, psychological resilience, and lifelong engagement.

Conclusions

This qualitative narrative study successfully addressed the critical problem of high attrition among beginner martial arts students by exploring the perceived barriers to retention and the role of motivation among individuals who discontinued training before achieving the rank of black belt. The study’s purpose was fully achieved through the collection of rich, firsthand

narratives from former students that revealed the complex and multifaceted reasons for withdrawal. Moreover, this research established a foundational framework for martial arts organizations to better understand the psychological, instructional, and environmental factors that undermine student retention, moving beyond superficial assumptions focused solely on cost or scheduling.

The research identified a critical disconnect, although initial enrollment was often driven by deeply personal motivations, particularly the need for self-defense rooted in personal trauma (N = 6), these powerful drivers proved insufficient to sustain engagement amid compounding challenges during training. The thematic analysis demonstrated that attrition did not result from a single cause but from the convergence of three pervasive categories of barriers, all cited by every participant (N = 10): (a) Psychological and Emotional Barriers (internal struggles such as fear, loss of motivation, and unmet needs for recognition), (b) Expectations-versus-Reality Barriers (dissatisfaction with authoritarian instruction and irrelevant curricula, such as excessive kata), and (c) Systemic and Contextual Barriers (unavoidable external constraints, most notably the closure or relocation of training schools).

The most significant contribution of this study is the development of a multidimensional retention model that reframes martial arts attrition not as a logistical or financial issue, but as a systemic failure to meet students' psychological, motivational, and practical needs. By directly linking the high valence of trauma-related motivation to subsequent declines in expectancy and instrumentality within Vroom's expectancy theory (ET) framework, this research provides a vital foundation for advancing both academic understanding and industry application. The study's actionable recommendations—centered on implementing a Trauma-Informed Pedagogical Shift

and improving Systemic Reliability—offer a blueprint for transforming martial arts schools into supportive, psychologically safe, and genuinely empowering environments.

The nine recommendations for future research outlined in this chapter will continue to expand this field, enabling quantitative validation, longitudinal analysis, and cross-cultural comparison of the current findings. Collectively, these studies will deepen the understanding of motivation, engagement, and retention across martial arts disciplines. By implementing the changes recommended in this study, the martial arts industry can better serve vulnerable populations seeking training for healing, empowerment, and personal safety, thereby maximizing the long-term psychological, social, and educational benefits of the practice. In conclusion, high dropout rates in martial arts are not inevitable outcomes but correctable consequences of institutional misalignment. Sustainable change requires a holistic, trauma-aware approach that honors the deep personal commitment students bring to the training floor and transforms martial arts from a temporary pursuit into a lifelong practice of growth, resilience, and empowerment.

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Appendix A
Qualitative Data Collection Instrument

Exploring Retention through Student Motivation and Engagement in Martial Arts

Date: _____

1. Introduction

1) *“With your permission, I would like to record this interview to ensure accuracy for future data analysis. The recording can be turned off at any time during the interview process, or if you prefer, I can take notes, or you can provide your answers in writing. You, the participant, have the right to voluntarily refuse to answer or withdraw from the interview at any time. Is this okay? May I record our interview?”*

“Have you received and signed the required form to participate in the study?”

“The purpose of this study is to explore what motivates a person to enroll in and continue in their martial arts training rather than quit shortly after they begin.”

“Did you participate in the interview without any form of duress or pressure?”

“Do you have any questions regarding the study, procedures, goals, or the conduct of the interview?”

2. Interview

“The purpose of this interview is to explore what motivates a person to enroll in and continue in their martial arts training rather than quit shortly after they begin.”

Part A: Participant Information

A1. Interviewer: Nathan W. Chlumsky

A2. Participant ID # / Demographic Info (Appendix G): _____

A3. Role: Current Student / Former Student

A4. Gender: Male / Female / Trans / Agender / Nonbinary

A5. Age: _____

A6. Number of days, months, or years of training: _____

A7. Style of Dojo/School: _____

A8. Location of Dojo/Style: _____

A9. Rank of the student: _____

A10. Educational level of the student: Beginner / Intermediate / Advanced / Black Belt

A11. (If trained in multiple locations) Age (when previously enrolled): _____

A12. (If trained in multiple locations) Number of days, months, or years of training:

A13. (If trained in multiple locations) Style of Dojo/School: _____

A14. (If trained in multiple locations) Location of Dojo/Style: _____

A15. (If trained in multiple locations) Rank of the student: _____

A16. (If trained in multiple locations) The educational level of the student: Beginner /
Intermediate / Advanced / Black Belt

Part B: Interview Questions for the Student

B1. Why did you enroll in martial arts?

B2. Did anyone influence your decision to enroll in martial arts classes, and if so, who was it?

B3. Are there any perceived benefits associated with martial arts training that influenced your decision to enroll in a martial arts program? If so, what are they?

B4. Before enrolling, did you consider other activities as an alternative to martial arts and fitness? If so, why did you decide to choose martial arts?

B5. Were there personal reasons (e.g., bullying, desire to compete) that influenced your decision to train in the martial arts, and if so, what were they?

B6. Was there any external information about the style, school, and/or instructor that influenced your decision to enroll, and if so, what was it?

B7. What was it that you liked best about the training at the facility or facilities?

B8. What was it that you liked the least about the training at the facility or facilities?

B9. What were the main reasons that led you to end your training at the facility or facilities?

B10. Is there anything that the facility or facilities could have done differently that could have persuaded you to remain in training, and if so, what?

B11. Since dropping out, would there be anything that would compel you to begin training again, whether at the same school or in another location, and if so, what?

B12. What was the instructor's fee for lessons, and were discounts and monthly specials available?

B13. Were the classes divided into age and/or rank? If so, what are your feelings about this?

B14. Were classes offered in a group setting, private, or both? Which setting do you prefer and why?

- B15.** How long were the classes? Were they too long or not long enough? Were there breaks during the training session?
- B16.** What types of physical training did you typically engage in regularly? Were there any forms of training that are done less regularly?
- B17.** Were there types of training that you wish were done more often? If so, why?
- B18.** Please describe the level, amount, and force of physical contact that you experienced during training. Was it mild, just right, or too aggressive?
- B19.** Did the instructor teach a specific philosophy or moral tenet? If so, how?
- B20.** Did the instructor teach about the style's history and use foreign language concepts, such as when counting and giving commands? If so, how do you feel about this?
- B21.** Are you competitive with or were the other students competitive? If so, how do you feel about this?
- B22.** What kind of training environment was present during training? Was it structured and formal, laid-back and informal, or a mix of both? What were your thoughts on the class structure?
- B23.** How do you feel about achieving a belt rank for yourself?
- B24.** Is there anything else you would like to share that would be useful in helping me further understand why you chose to participate in martial arts lessons, and if so, what?
- B25.** Is there anything else you would like to share that would be useful in helping me further understand why you decided to end your martial arts training, and, if so, what?

Appendix B
Permission Letter to the Social Media Administrator

Dear Administrator(s),

My name is Nathan W. Chlumsky. I am writing to inform you that I would like to conduct a research study on your social media platform. I would like to interview martial arts students aged 18 and above. I conducted interviews at times that were most convenient for the participants. These interviews can be conducted individually, one-on-one, via your school's location in a private setting, on social media platforms such as Google Meet or Zoom, or over the telephone. The interviews are expected to take no more than 30 minutes, but times may vary. It is essential to note that participants may be asked to participate in a follow-up call, email, or focus group prior to the completion of my study.

This study aims to explore what motivates a person to enroll in and continue their martial arts training rather than quit shortly after beginning. The interview questions are open-ended, requiring more than yes-or-no answers, and are relatively straightforward. I personally assure you that all data collected in this study will be strictly confidential and private, ensuring total and complete confidentiality. Both the participant's names and your platform's name will only be disclosed to me, the university's dissertation board, and other researchers in the field.

Thank you for taking the time to consider my request.

Respectfully,
Nathan W. Chlumsky

Appendix C
Introduction Letter

Salutations to you;

My name is Nathan W. Chlumsky, and I am a doctoral student at National University. I cordially invite you to participate in an interview session for my dissertation research study. My research's overall focus is to explore what motivates a person to enroll in and continue martial arts training rather than quit shortly after beginning. In the 45-minute or less interview (note times may vary), you will be asked 26 questions.

With your permission, I would like to record the interview session using an audio recording device. You may review the session transcript, which will be sent to you by email, for accuracy. Data collected from the interview will be kept confidential and used solely for this study, and will not be disclosed to any other parties. Your identity and the school's identity will remain anonymous. Only individual styles will be known to determine whether there are differences in results among those styles.

Your responses to the interview questions will help me in my research and improve my understanding of why a person enrolls in martial arts training and whether they choose to continue or quit shortly after beginning. You are welcome to have a copy of the study and the findings once they are completed.

If you are willing to take part in the study, I can be reached at N.Chlumsky7483@o365.ncu.edu. You may also call and/or text me at 1 (620) 617-1701. Once I

am contacted, we can arrange an interview time that suits you best. Attached is an informed consent form for participation in the study. Please take the time to review the form thoroughly. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me. Before the interview begins, I will ask you to sign the form and, if it is conducted virtually, return it to me digitally. I will be more than happy to visit with you and answer any questions that you may have about the study and the interview process. Please feel free to call, text, or email me at any time if you have any questions or concerns about participating in the study, completing the form, or any other aspect of the study.

Cordially,

Nathan W. Chlumsky, Ph.D. Candidate

National University

Dr. Brandy Kamm, Ph.D., Dissertation Chair

National University bkamm@nu.edu

Appendix D
Informed Consent Form

Information:

My name is Nathan W. Chlumsky, and I am a doctoral candidate at National University. I am conducting a research study on what motivates people to enroll in and continue martial arts training rather than quit shortly after they begin. I am completing this research as part of the requirements for my doctoral degree. I humbly invite you to participate.

Activities:

If you choose to participate, you will be asked to take part in a 30-minute or shorter interview. However, times may vary.

Following the interview, a formal transcript of your interview and the answers you provided will be sent to you via email for your review and approval. I encourage you to review the transcript in its entirety for accuracy and provide any additional feedback, corrections, or information as you see fit. If you choose to review the transcript, it should take approximately 20-30 minutes.

Eligibility:

You are eligible to participate in the research study if you meet any of the following criteria:

1. A person who is a former martial arts student and is at least 18 years of age.

You are not eligible to participate in the research study if you:

1. Are under the age of 18.
2. Have never trained in martial arts or combat sports.
3. Have continued to train to the point where you attained the rank of black belt or higher.

I hope to have at least 10-15 participants in this research study.

Risks:

Minimal risks exist in this study, but they could be:

- i. Boredom and stress.

To mitigate the risk, you may terminate the interview at any time.

- ii. Manipulation and fear of retaliation.

I can personally assure the participant(s) of this study that complete anonymity will be of the utmost importance, and that the information will be shared on a need-to-know basis (i.e., with me, the National University Dissertation Board and Chair, the participant (s) themselves, and other researchers in the field). All of which promise to adhere to strict confidentiality guidelines. While it may be possible for others to learn the participants' identities, it is doubtful that this will happen, given the safeguards already in place and those that will be implemented.

- iii. Trust issues directed toward me, the interviewer.

Again, I assure the participant(s) that confidentiality will be strictly adhered to and followed before, during, and after the research is completed. If the participant wants to stop the process, they have the right to do so at any time. The participant has the overall choice of when, where, and how the interview will take place.

- iv. Personal bias and stereotyping of the interviewee and/or interviewer.

Opinions may be held by both me and the interviewee, which may lead the potential participant to feel that they are not being assessed fairly. I promise to maintain a fair and open mind throughout the entire interview process, keeping personal feelings and biases out of the research and always remaining professional.

Benefits:

- a. Although there are no direct benefits to you, the participant, in this study, you have the opportunity to contribute to research that is important to the fields of martial arts, combat sports, and sports and fitness in general.
- b. The findings of this study can then be used to enhance the quality and overall experience for you, the buyer, which will, in turn, benefit you in the long run as a consumer of such services.
- c. These potential benefits will be particularly valuable for instructors and business owners, as they will gain a deeper understanding of why people choose to join a martial arts or fitness facility only to discontinue their training shortly after and what they may need to do differently to retain them as clients.
- d. Interviewing will enable me to compare your answers with those of other participants and identify potential patterns that may or may not exist.
- e. The interview process will be relatively quick and easy.

Confidentiality:

All information provided throughout the course of this study will be kept confidential to the fullest extent permitted by law.

Some of the steps I will take include assigning each participant a unique participant number/code and excluding participants' names and the dojos/schools from the study.

The only people who will have access to your answers will be me, my Dissertation Chair, the National University's Institutional Research Board, and other researchers in martial arts and fitness. You will also be given copies of your answers for review to ensure I understand the information you shared.

All your information will be locked away in a fireproof safe. Digital information will be stored in a password-protected computer file and flash drive. The information consent form and all other forms/files will be stored separately from the interview data to preserve anonymity and complete confidentiality. I also live alone, so there is little to no chance of others viewing any data that is collected.

Interview data will be retained for no more than 3 years, after which I will delete and destroy all electronic and paper copies.

Contact Information:

If you have any questions, you are encouraged to contact me at:
N.Chlumsky7483@o365.ncu.edu or call or text me at: 1 (620) 617-1701.

My Dissertation Chair is Dr. Brandy Kamm, Ph.D. She works at National University and supervises all of my research. She can be contacted at: bkamm@nu.edu

If you have any questions about your rights during the research process or if any problems arise, please do not hesitate to contact the National University Institutional Review Board at irb@ncu.edu or call 1-888-327-2877, ext. 8014.

Voluntary Participation:

Your participation in the study is voluntary. If you choose to participate or stop participating soon after you start, no penalty or repercussion will be directed toward you. You will not lose any benefits to which you may be entitled.

The study is not affiliated with the martial arts school in any way, and there will be no repercussions for non-participation, as I am conducting the study to fulfill the requirements for my doctoral degree. Your decision to participate or not will not affect any future training opportunities.

Audio Recording:

I want to record our interview session using an audio device. You may still participate in the study even if you choose not to be recorded. If you do not wish to be recorded, I will take notes during the interview as an alternative way to gather your responses to the questions I will ask.

Please sign on the line below if I may record you during the interview:

Termination of Participation:

You may withdraw from the study at any time by simply requesting to stop the interview.

Signature:

By signing this consent form, you acknowledge that you understand all the terms stipulated. You will receive a copy of the signed form for your records.

Participant's Printed Name	Signature	Date
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Parent of Participant Printed Name	Signature	Date
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Researcher's Printed Name	Signature	Date
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Appendix E
Pre-Screening Form

Eligibility:

The person is eligible to participate in the research study if they meet any of the following criteria:

- 4. The potential participant meets the required age requirement of 18 or above.
- 5. The potential participant is a former martial arts student who quit training.
- 6. The potential participant quit martial arts training before earning the black belt.
- 7. The potential participant is willing to take part in person or online via video chat for interviews and focus groups, and is willing to participate multiple times if needed to obtain accurate information for the study.

The person is not eligible to participate in the research study if they:

- 1. Are under the age of 18.
- 2. Have never trained in martial arts.
- 3. Have continued to train to the point where you attained the black belt or higher rank.
- 4. Are not willing to take part in person or online video chats for interviews and focus groups, and are not willing to participate multiple times if needed to obtain accurate information for the study.

Meets Requirements

Does Not Meet Requirements

Signature:

By signing this pre-screening form, you acknowledge that you understand all the terms stipulated to meet the requirements and have met or have not met those said requirements. You will receive a copy of the signed form for your records.

Participant's Printed Name	Signature	Date
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Parent of Participant Printed Name	Signature	Date
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Researcher's Printed Name	Signature	Date
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Appendix F
Demographic Information for Study Participants

FS = Former Student

Participant	Gender	Age	Style of Martial Art	Location/State
FS1	M	33	Kickboxing/Taekwondo; Judo; Melee	Bartlesville and Oklahoma City, OK.
FS2	M	19	Taekwondo, Boxing, Judo	Claremore, OK
FS3	M	36	Boxing, Kickboxing, Greco-Roman Wrestling	Bartlesville and Muskogee, OK
FS4	F	39	Taekwondo, Boxing, Kickboxing, MMA, Taichi	Owasso, Guthrie, Moore, and Bartlesville, OK, and China
FS5	M	59	Karate, Taekwondo, Kung Fu, Judo, Aikido, Kenjutsu	United Kingdom
FS6	M	36	Taekwondo, MCMAP (Marine Corps Martial Arts Program)	Tulsa, OK., and U.S. Marine Corps.
FS7	F	47	Shorinryu Karate	Larned & Great Bend, KS

FS8	M	51	Taekwondo, Wing Chun, Shotokan Karate	Emmett, Idaho; Larned, KS; & Lacrosse, KS
FS9	M	33	American Taekwondo	Perkins, OK
FS10	M	24	Taekwondo	Bartlesville, OK
