

A Journey of Continuous Commitment to Martial Arts in Alumni Karate Practitioners

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Abstract. This study aimed to explore the driving aspects of continuous commitment towards karate among Singaporean alumni karate practitioners by examining three periods of their journey; commitment to early participation, commitment to sport karate participation and commitment to present participation. The research question behind this study was what are the driving aspects of continuous commitment in alumni Karate practitioners based on early participation, sport karate participation and present participation? Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 7 black-belt karate practitioners between the ages of 21 - 26 years old. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. For data analysis, thematic analysis was employed, and themes were identified and categorised into higher order themes. Member-checking was performed to check transcript accuracy and clarify the themes. Four driving aspects surfaced based on the three periods of commitment; Personal competency, personal enjoyment, personal well-being and personal obligations. The study further discussed the driving aspects and underlying themes that drove continuous commitment to Karate. Results of this study could benefit martial arts clubs and relevant organisations in understanding some of the factors behind karate commitment and engagement. The implications may be translated into healthy lifestyle engagement policies by government or policy-making bodies in encouraging active health and lifelong sport participation. Further research on Karate could focus on the influence of overall training time and club affiliation in driving commitment to the martial art.

Key words: karate, martial arts, continuous commitment, participation.

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INTRODUCTION

Karate is a martial art which originated from Okinawa, Japan, with historical records dating as far back as the 17th century (Cramer, 2018). Karate practitioners (herein 'Karateka') all over the world are predominantly trained in basic techniques such as blocks, punches and kicks and advanced forms such as kumite and kata. Kumite refers to sparring, whereby Karateka engage in controlled combat with each other for sport or for self-defense training. Kata, on the other hand, refers to a series of choreographed pattern of movements using basic karate techniques and footwork. Both Kumite and Kata are also components of sport Karate, which simply refers to karate in a competitive setting. The merit of practising Karate regularly has been found to benefit cognitive functioning (Alesi et al., 2014; Witte, Kropf, Darius, Emmermacher, & Böckelmann, 2016), emotional well-being (Jansen, Dahmen-Zimmer, Kudielka, & Schulz, 2017) and social aspects (Meyer & Bittmann, 2018). Apart from physical training, Karate training also consists of philosophical and moral aspects which aims to build character (Cramer, 2018; Funakoshi, Nakasone & Takagi, 2003). One of the values that karate practitioners are encouraged to develop is commitment, as dedication is required to achieve proficiency in the art and to attain a black belt. As a result, practitioners can choose to commit to karate not just as a sport, but also as "a way of life" in order to pursue self-mastery. In reality however, many karateka fail to develop the commitment necessary to persist in the karate journey and drop out from the martial art even before achieving a black belt.

In Singapore, karate is largely taught in schools and community centers as an extra-curricular activity. As a result, students make up a large proportion of the karate community in Singapore. For this study, alumni karateka are of particular interest. The alumni karateka would have likely picked up the martial art during their schooling days, participated in sport karate tournaments, graduated from the school and continued practicing karate with the club. These alumni karateka had also chosen to commit to Karate notwithstanding the shifting environment and the tumultuous scene of Karate in Singapore. Political issues within the last decade has affected the competitive opportunities available to the athletes (Low, 2017; Noor, 2016). Furthermore, with Taekwondo and mixed martial arts rising in popularity and opportunities (Rainey, 2009), it was not uncommon to hear people switching martial arts based on popularity. And yet, these alumni karateka had still chosen to persist in their karate journey.

A prominent framework used to examine commitment in the sporting context is the Sport Commitment Model. The model defined sport commitment as “a psychological construct representing the desire and resolve to continue sport participation” (Scanlan, Carpenter, Simons, Schmidt & Keeler, 1993, p. 3). After the second version of the framework was developed, two types of commitment were identified; Enthusiastic and constrained (Scanlan, Chow, Sousa, Scanlan & Knifsend, 2016). The two types of commitment represent the functional and obligatory types of commitment that seemingly drive individuals to persist in their sport. Enthusiastic commitment denotes the ‘want to’ side of commitment, in that individuals continue their sport endeavors because they want to. The sources driving enthusiastic commitment are ‘sport enjoyment’, ‘valuable opportunities’, ‘other priorities’, ‘personal investments’ and ‘social constraints’. Constrained commitment, on the other hand, denotes the “have to” side of commitment, in that individuals continue because they have to, due to obligatory reasons. For constrained commitment, ‘social support’ and ‘desire to excel’ was identified. While the sport commitment model has identified several sources of commitment, these are largely referring to the sport context and there may still be other sources of commitment which has yet to be covered by the framework.

Understanding why alumni karateka remain committed may provide greater insights to the driving aspects of commitment which could differ from the sources of commitment identified in the Sport Commitment Model. In considering the sport commitment model as the framework to discern the sources of commitment driving alumni karateka to persist in their karate journey, the quantitative nature of the construct may be limited in identifying new sources of commitment. Thus, a qualitative intervention may be more appropriate to explore the driving aspects of commitment in karate practitioners. Furthermore, considering the dearth of studies on commitment in karate practitioners, it may be worthwhile to investigate the driving aspects behind the continuous commitment in alumni Karateka at different periods of their participation.

This study thus aimed to explore the driving aspects that compelled Karate practitioners to continuously commit to karate by examining three periods of their journey; commitment to early participation, commitment to sport karate participation and commitment to present participation. The main research question behind this study was: what are the driving aspects of continuous commitment in Karate practitioners based on their early participation, sport karate participation and present participation ?

METHOD

Participants

A total of 7 black-belt karate practitioners (2 females, 5 males), between the ages of 21 to 26 participated in the study. The participants were alumni of a tertiary institution and had continued practising Karate with the club even after graduation. At the time of the study, each participant had been practising Karate for at least 5 years, with the longest being 17 years. To be eligible for participation in this study, participants had to be 1) Willing to convey and share their experiences about the topic, 2) Be a black belt, 3) Joined Karate as a student, 4) Participated in sport karate tournaments, 5) Continued practising karate after graduation. The participants are identified as P1 to P7.

Data Collection

As the nature of the study sought to analyse the experiences of the specific group, a qualitative approach using semi-structured, in-depth, one-to-one interviews were used. Permission to commence

the study was first sought from the Nanyang Technological University Institutional Review board before the first interview was conducted. An interview guide was also prepared before the start of the first round interviews to ensure that key questions were asked to each participant. After IRB approval (IRB-2019-04-009), participants were recruited and notified in person about details regarding the study by the researcher. Before the start of the interviews, each participant was first informed by the researcher that their involvement in the study was strictly voluntary and no penalty would be incurred if they decided to withdraw at any time. Upon acknowledgement, the participants were then asked to sign a consent form. Time and venue of the interviews were scheduled based on the convenience of the participants.

To gain a better understanding and to generate meanings from the participants' shared experiences, inductive reasoning was used in structuring the interview questions (DeCarlo, n.d.). Each interview began with some personal questions to build rapport between the interviewer and participant before questions about the reasons for commitment during the three stages were posed. The duration of the interviews took between 20 minutes to 45 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with a Samsung Note 9 and subsequently transcribed verbatim. A member-check interview was also conducted with each participants (except P3) to review the transcript and to clarify interpretation of the themes by the researcher (Harvey, 2015). Member-check interviews took between 30 minutes to 75 minutes.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to analyse the qualitative data by identifying, analysing, and reporting the themes that existed within the data. Following the first step of the thematic analysis process, the researcher read through each transcript and replayed the audio recording several times to become familiarised with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For the second step, coding was performed to identify significant statements from the responses that were relevant to the research questions. For the third step, the researcher reviewed and categorised the codes to search for coherent and meaningful patterns relevant to the research question. For the fourth step, once the themes were defined, the researcher reviewed the theme to check and see if the themes are in relation to the coded extracts and the full data-set. For the fifth step, names were assigned to each theme once the themes were determined. Lastly, after the data were analyzed by the researcher, a third party had checked, provided feedback and confirmed the accuracy of it. Higher order themes were categorised into dimensions which served as the basis in suggesting what the driving aspects of commitment were.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Four driving aspects of commitment surfaced based on the three periods of commitment; Personal competency, personal enjoyment, personal well-being and personal obligations (**Table 1**).

Personal Competency

With regards to the driving aspects of commitment to early participation, the following underlying themes were expressed: 'To join tournaments', 'to learn more about karate', 'to climb up the belt rank' and 'to improve karate basics and techniques'. P7 explained about how the drive to improve technical proficiency drove commitment towards karate:

"When I first started out, I wanted to get better. So basically is just, as they taught more things, I wanted to do those things and get better at doing those things. So wanted to hit harder, wanted to go faster and such. So it was mostly... the motivations were very pure in that sense. I just wanted to get better at karate." (P7)

During the period of sport karate participation, identified themes driving commitment included 'to win', 'sense of pride', 'to reduce risk of injury', 'to meet competition standards' and 'to understand and improve oneself'. P1 shared the following with regards to 'to meet competition standards':

"But that's because I signed up my name on the tournament already and I can't afford to just go there and take it easier." (P1)

P5 also mentioned about being committed to understanding and improving oneself during the sport karate period:

"And since you have faced other opponents right, you would know that there are people that are this fast, this strong, and people who can punch this hard... then, you'll want to train up that area and be better. So is all about continuous improvement." (P5)

When asked about the driving aspects of commitment for Karate at present, the themes were ‘to join tournaments’, ‘to learn more about karate’, ‘to maintain self-discipline’, ‘to perform better than other people’, ‘to maintain black belt standard’ and ‘to improve karate basics and techniques’. P2 explains how being a black belt had driven commitment to karate training:

“When your standard is bad you’re like yea, whatever... but I’m a yellow belt. But now that you’re a senior, a black belt, and your standard is bad, you’re like I still must be able to do it better than the other people.” (P2)

Personal Enjoyment

‘Enjoying karate training’ was a major recurring theme across all three participation periods in driving participants to be committed to Karate. P7 shared the following:

“But, is also because I found it (training) fun. That’s the main thing. I think one thing is that if I didn’t find it fun to do the training and all that right, I wouldn’t have been able to survive as long as I did. And it will not be so matter-of-fact that I had to go for training also. So if we were to boil it down to the reason why I came back for the training, what motivated me was that I liked what I was doing.” (P7)

Other than enjoying training karate, other themes identified in the early participation period was ‘club environment’ and ‘wanting to come down to have fun’. P1 shared how the club environment and training experience had drove him to continue Karate:

“When I first started was because I enjoyed the trainings. I like to sweat. The sparring sessions were sort of fun, exciting and bloody at that time. But what made me stay for so long is that I felt quite comfortable there. I feel like I can get along with the people quite well. So I stayed there. So it’s like a second home kinda thing.” (P1)

During the sport karate period, other themes included ‘wanting to fight’ and ‘enjoying competition training’. P7 explained:

“One thing is because I like sparring in the first place, I like kumite. So to me, one of the main reasons I joined karate, or one of the main things I like about doing karate in that sense right was the sparring.” (P7)

At present, other themes included ‘free training’ and ‘club environment’. P3 shared how a positive club environment was a driving aspect of commitment:

“But I feel that, there’s the culture of our club that made me want to stay. And the senseis are very passion. The senpais also very passion. Makes me feel motivated to come back and train.” (P3)

Personal Well-being

At early participation, the themes which drove alumni karate practitioners to continuously commit to Karate were ‘to improve fitness’, ‘to relieve stress’ and ‘to meet friends’. P7 explained how improving fitness made him remain committed:

“When I first started I felt like I was going to die every training. So basically, I.. before karate, I had no prior sports background. I played some sports here and there with my family, and in sec 4 I did do tennis once a week, every week, regularly but that was recreational as well. So karate was the first time I did anything seriously- sports seriously – in that sense. So, yea. That was the main thing I felt. But the main thing, coming back was, I knew I should probably get – if I wanted to continue karate – I should probably increase fitness and all that. And it was fun la, so I had fun torturing myself and such.” (P7)

For present participation, the identified themes were ‘to maintain fitness’, ‘to become stronger’, ‘to relieve stress’, ‘to reduce self-loath’ and ‘to meet friends’. P4 shared about how his goals for health drove him to commit:

“My current goals is to keep myself more fit and healthy. To also get physically stronger. Like, relative strength. Like real world strength. Not just for competition type of strength.” (P4).

In terms of social reasons for present commitment, P2 shared how being in the company of friends were one of the driving aspects:

“Main factor I come down is sometimes is fitness, sometimes is maybe I hear Friend A or Friend B coming down. Like yea, there’s company for sure.” (P2).

Personal Obligations

For the sport karate period, themes driving commitment included ‘to be a good representative of the club at tournaments’, ‘to bring honor to the club’ and ‘did not want to waste coach’s effort’. P5 stated:

“The reason what motivated me to go for training even though I’m very very tired is that I do not want to waste my coach effort.” (P5)

With regards to obligations to the club during the competitive period, P3 mentioned the following:

“Another thing is to... of course definitely have to bring honor back to our club and school.” (P3)

For present participation, the themes were ‘to support the instructor’, ‘to provide mentorship’, ‘to help the club’ and ‘to take care of the juniors’. P6 explained about how the instructor was a factor:

“I would say the friends, and sensei being there. It’s one of the reasons I come back also. We used to train together... From sensei first, like, he train us when we were in first year or second year in poly then after that, he always repeat, after 3 years, people always go, no one come back and I think, some of us needs to come back la. To respect, as a form of respect.” (P6)

With regards to the club, P3 shared the following:

“If you talk about in university, I was thinking of switching to other kind of sports but... I still think that I should go back to Karate. I feel like is.. I’ve been doing for very long and even I’m an alumni, I still have the responsibility to go back. And have fun as well. I just feel home there.” (P3)

Table 1. Driving aspects of continuous commitment in alumni karate practitioners by commitment stages

	Personal Competency	Personal Enjoyment	Personal Well-being	Personal Obligation
Commitment to Early Participation	To improve karate basics and techniques To learn more about karate To climb up the belt rank	Enjoys training karate Enjoys the club environment To play around To meet friends	To improve fitness To relieve stress	-
Commitment to Sport Karate Participation	To meet competition standards To reduce risk of injury To win Sense of pride To understand and improve oneself	Enjoys training karate Enjoys competition training Want to fight	-	To be a good representative of the club at tournaments To bring honor to the club Did not want to waste coach’s effort
Commitment to Present Participation	To improve Karate standard To maintain black belt standard To learn more about Karate To perform better than other people To maintain self-discipline	Enjoys training karate Enjoys the club environment Free training To meet friends	To improve/maintain fitness To relieve stress To reduce self-loath	To provide mentorship To help the club To take care of juniors To support the instructor

DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to explore the driving aspects that compelled alumni karateka to continuously commit to the martial art based on three different periods of their karate journey. The three periods of commitment were defined by following the chronological experiences undergone by alumni

karateka in their karate journey from students to alumni; Joining karate as students, participating in sport karate tournaments as representatives of the club and school, and continuing karate with the club even after graduation. For this study, commitment to early participation was defined as the period when the participants had first joined and practised karate, up until the time they first participated in sport karate tournaments; Commitment to sport karate participation was defined as the period when the participants were actively involved in sport karate training and tournaments; Commitment to present participation was defined as the period when the participants stopped participating in tournaments but continued training with the club. By defining the three periods of commitment, the findings from the present study offer clear insights to the driving aspects and the underlying themes compelling alumni karateka to continuously commit throughout their karate journey. The four driving aspects of commitment (personal competency, personal enjoyment, personal well-being and personal obligations) and its underlying themes will thus be discussed.

Personal competency was identified as a driving aspect of commitment in all three periods. This is supported by previous research as a source of commitment in sports and martial arts (Scanlan et al., 2016; Jones et al., 2006). Scanlan et al. (2016) identified ‘Desire to excel’ and described how wanting to achieve mastery was a source of commitment. ‘Skill development’, in the sense of to improve martial arts skill and get to a higher level, was reported by Jones et al. (2006) as a motive for participation. Consistent with those studies, the underlying themes also illustrate how personal competency had served to drive continuous commitment in alumni karateka throughout the course of the karate journey, for instance, ‘to improve karate performance’, ‘learn more about the martial art’ and ‘maintain standards of a black-belt’.

While personal competency served as a consistent driving aspect of commitment throughout the three periods, there are differences in the underlying themes between each period of commitment. For example, participants in the early participation period were driven by ‘To join tournaments’, ‘to learn more about karate’, ‘to climb up the belt rank’ and ‘to improve karate basics and techniques’ whereas present participation saw the emergence of new themes such as ‘to maintain self-discipline’, ‘to perform better than other people’ and ‘to maintain black belt standard’. Considering that the participants were white belts (new practitioners) during the early participation period and became black belts by the present participation period, an explanation to why the themes differed between the periods could be due to the belt-rank. Previous studies which examined commitment in taekwon-do have also suggested that belt ranks could have led to notable differences in participation motives (Zeng et al., 2015; Breese, 1998). As alumni karateka move up the belt rank, they also gain more experience. Thus, the opinions and views they hold with regards to Karate may change which may affect their reasons for personal competency.

Similar to personal competency, personal enjoyment was identified as a driving aspect throughout all three periods of commitment. This driving aspect is also supported by previous research as a source of commitment in sports and martial arts (Scanlan et al., 2016; Zeng et al., 2015). Scanlan et al. (2016) had identified ‘sport enjoyment’ as a source of commitment and Zeng et al. (2015) had concluded ‘enjoyment’ as a motivation in taekwon-do athletes. Consistent with the studies, the underlying themes also illustrate how personal enjoyment served to drive alumni karateka to commit continuously, for instance, “enjoys training karate”, “enjoys club environment” and “to meet friends”. This suggests that positive experiences attained from training, experiences with the club and friends had compelled alumni karateka to persist in their journey.

Of the four driving aspects, personal enjoyment may be the most important aspect in driving commitment among alumni karateka. In a study to identify the participation motivations and the perceived importance of certain participation factors in martial artists, Jones et al. (2006) concluded that ‘Affiliation’ and ‘Friendship’ were ranked the first and second in terms of participation motives. The two participation motives are similar with the underlying themes such as ‘to meet friends’ and ‘enjoys karate training’ identified in the present study, thus suggesting the importance of personal enjoyment in driving commitment in alumni karateka.

Personal well-being was identified as a driving aspect of commitment during early and present participation. This driving aspect is also supported by previous research as motives for commitment to martial arts participation (Parnabas, Shapie, Nizan & Parnabas, 2015; Jones et al., 2006; Breese, 1998, Zeng et al., 2015). Jones et al. (2006) reported that fitness was the third ranked motive for participation. Zeng et al. (2015) identified ‘physical needs’ as a motivating factor. Consistent with the studies, the

underlying themes also illustrate that ‘to improve fitness’ as a reason that drove alumni karate to remain committed.

Within the sport commitment model, well-being or health related aspects are not identified as a source of commitment (Scanlan et al., 2016). On the hand, studies on martial arts have identified fitness to be a motivating factor in driving martial art practitioners to continually participate in the art (Breese, 1998; Zeng et al., 2015). The findings from the present study also support the notion that personal well-being could be an aspect driving commitment. This thus suggests that one difference among the sources of commitment between sports and martial arts could be well-being needs.

Personal obligations was identified as a driving aspect during the sport karate and present participation period. This driving aspect drove alumni karate to commit continuously as they felt obligated towards the club and/or instructor. Between the two periods, differences are reflected between obligatory aspects during sport karate participation and present participation period. During sport karate participation, participants had felt obligated to be a good representative and bring honor to the club. In contrast, during present participation, the sense of obligation was not about the coach’s expectations but was instead derived from a personal sense of duty to support the club members. An explanation for this might be the expectations placed on alumni karateka during both periods. In the period of sport karate participation, there are expectations placed on the alumni karateka to represent the club or school, and to win. On the other hand, in present participation, the expectations are mostly derived from the individual themselves and not the instructor, club or school. The participants of the present study have also mentioned that the sense of obligation they feel during present participation is something that stemmed from themselves.

Previous studies which had identified obligatory aspects as a source of commitment have done so only in sport settings (Scanlan et al., 2016; Inigo, Podlog & Hall, 2015). Scanlan et al. (2016) identified ‘social constraints’ as a source of commitment, which referred to how athletes had felt obligated to play the sport due to expectations and pressure from significant others such as coaches, friends and teammates. Inigo, Podlog & Hall (2015) identified ‘contractual obligations’ as a source of commitment in driving injured athletes to return to sport. To the authors’ knowledge, studies have yet to report how personal obligations could be a source of commitment driving practitioners to commit to karate continuously in non-competitive periods. Possible reasons for the lack of studies documenting personal obligations as a driving aspect of commitment in non-competitive settings may be due to the methodology of the studies examining commitment and the participant pool. As quantitative studies such as questionnaires are comprised of structured items, the responses given by the participants are limited to the options available. Next, considering that the participants of the present study are alumni karateka, emotional connections to the school and club may have contributed to the participants’ feelings of obligations. This could also explain why the underlying themes behind personal obligations were not present in the early participation period. Thus, more research could be done to examine the different types of obligatory aspects which serve as a driving aspect of commitment to karate in individuals.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the four driving aspects which serve as driving aspects of commitment throughout the karate journey of alumni karate are personal competency, personal enjoyment, personal well-being and personal obligations. In addition, the underlying themes behind the driving aspects may change following the experiences attained by the karateka, illustrating that commitment is a dynamic construct that may change according to the passage of time. A notable finding of this study is with regards to how personal obligations could be a source of commitment in non-competitive periods, considering that previous studies have yet to support this point. Following on, this study expands the work of Scanlan et al. (2016) regarding the Sport Commitment Model to examine commitment in a martial art as compared to sports.

As government bodies continue to encourage the public to become involved and maintain lifelong sport participation, there may be a greater need to advocate activities that are not limited by an individual’s age, skill level or disability. By doing so, this may effectively enable people to continue active health participation throughout their lifetime. One such activity is Karate, which even among martial arts, is relatively easy for anyone to pick up and continue. Understanding the driving aspects of commitment in alumni karateka could thus benefit martial arts clubs and relevant bodies in sustaining

membership and encouraging lifelong sport participation.

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