MARTIAL ARTS STUDIES

OFER MUCHTAR AND ORR LEVENTAL

GOING THE DISTANCE: JUDO CLUBS AS A FRAMEWORK FOR STRESS AND SOCIAL MOBILITY AMONG MALE IMMIGRANTS FROM THE FORMER USSR IN ISRAEL

ABSTRACT

This study asks how immigrants from former Soviet Union countries understand the role of *judo* clubs in their experiences of belonging and social inclusion in Israel. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 35 male participants from three clubs: 25 *judokas* aged 19–25 and 10 coaches and club managers. Qualitative content analysis generated categories that were subsequently interpreted through differential opportunity theory. Participants described emotional support, self-efficacy, achievement aspirations, belonging, and opportunities for purposeful engagement, alongside experiences of pressure and vulnerability. The accounts suggest that club relationships and practices may provide resources for negotiating inclusion, while also imposing demanding expectations. The non-longitudinal design and focus on active members and current staff limit conclusions about causal effects, realized social mobility, and integration beyond the club. The study contributes a contextualized understanding of the perceived opportunities and tensions associated with sustained judo participation.

CONTRIBUTORS

Ofer Muchtar is a senior lecturer in the Department of Criminology at Ashkelon Academic College. His research focuses on sociology of crime, violence and deviance, corrections, rehabilitation, and sports sociology.

ofermu2@gmail.com.

Orr Levental is a professor of geography and sociology of sport at University of Kiryat Shmona - Tel-Hai in the Galilee (formerly Tel-Hai College). He heads the Department of Physical Education and the Research Center for Sport and Physical Activity. His research focuses on sport, identity, and fandom.

leventalorr@telhai.ac.il

KEYWORDS

differential opportunity; former USSR; immigrants; informal education; Judo; sport

Accepted for publication on 15 October 2026

CC BY-NC-ND

Muchtar, O., & Levental, O. (2026). Going the distance: Judo clubs as a framework for stress and social mobility among male immigrants from the former USSR in Israel. *Martial Arts Studies,* 22, 26–36. https://doi.org/10.18573/mas.428

Going the distance: Judo clubs as a framework for stress and social mobility among male immigrants from the former USSR in Israel

Ofer Muchtar and Orr Levental

INTRODUCTION

During the 1990s, the State of Israel welcomed over one million immigrants from former Soviet Union countries. Migration is a major life transition that can involve substantial challenges and emotional distress. Feelings of distress among immigrants are considered a normative response to cross-cultural transition (Edelstein, 2008). Immigrant youth may find themselves in anomic situations as a result of sharp social changes that undermine guiding behavioral principles (Durkheim, 1947).

This article examines the extent to which judo clubs contribute to the welfare of immigrants from former Soviet Union countries and whether the sport assists these immigrants in integrating into Israeli society. Various researchers have demonstrated how sports frameworks can be utilized to integrate individuals from different population segments and locations to create social cohesion (Carmi, 2017). Sport may serve as a mechanism for social mobility and inclusion of people from different classes, without discrimination, by providing equal opportunities to all competitors (Aharoni et al., 2013).

According to the differential opportunity theory of Cloward and Ohlin (2013), the key to solving social problems that may accompany immigration, such as unemployment, violence, and crime, is the allocation of social resources and social development as a methodology for creating social mobility, integration, and preventing delinquency (Muchtar, 2025). That is, allocating additional resources to immigrant youth to prevent risky behaviors and assist in creating solidarity and social integration through positive and accessible alternatives (Coalter, 2021). One way to create differential opportunities is by initiating sport and recreation programs for immigrants: open programs, funded by donations or government funding, inviting them to participate in sports activities. Such programs can offer opportunities for social connection and purposeful engagement, while young people themselves actively shape their participation, relationships, and the meanings they attach to sport.

Judo is a prominent Olympic sport in Israel, with the highest number of participants and active athletes (Galily et al., 2009). According to the International Judo Federation (IJF), judo is practiced by more than 20 million participants worldwide and is organized through over 200 national federations. The sport has a strong global presence and is one of the most widely practiced Olympic combat sports (Coalter, 2021). Jigoro Kano established Kodokan judo in 1882 and conceived it as an educational practice integrating physical training with intellectual and moral development. In his account, the principles of judo extended beyond combat to everyday conduct and social relationships (Kano, 1932).

Various studies show that sport has a far-reaching social impact on its practitioners. Numerous studies have demonstrated that engagement in sport contributes both to the physical health of the athlete and to their mental health, including the sense of self-efficacy. Participants in judo clubs have various characteristics, including gender, origin, socioeconomic status, religious belief, political opinions, and age (Collins, 2012). The unique characteristics of athletes such as physical appearance, weight divisions, and various physical attributes, make judo clubs an interesting case study in the context of social impacts in general and the socialization process in particular. The current study examines the contribution of judo clubs to the integration processes and social mobility among immigrant youth from former Soviet Union countries.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Background to the difficulties of immigrants from former Soviet Union countries: Cultural differences

The Soviet Union sprawled across a vast territory and included numerous countries with great diversity. It had countries that differed from one another geographically (some countries were Asian and some European) and culturally. This fact creates difficulty in referring to cultural elements common to all immigrants (Edelstein, 2008); yet, there are certain cultural elements common to immigrants from these countries upon which this article focuses. In Soviet culture, external control centers dominated with great force in all areas of individual and family life. The political-social conception was one of subordinating individual needs and rights to society's needs. Therefore, differences in expectations regarding authority, family relationships, and appropriate behavior may complicate cross-cultural adjustment. Such differences should not, however, be treated as evidence of a shared behavioral deficit among immigrant youth, whose responses vary according to their circumstances, relationships, and experiences. Migration may require young people and their parents to renegotiate expectations concerning authority, autonomy, and family obligations. When parents and children interpret the demands of the receiving society differently, these adjustments can generate misunderstanding and strain within family relationships (Edelstein, 2008; Carmi, 2017). Such tensions should be understood in relation to the circumstances of migration and changing family roles, rather than as inherent characteristics of immigrant youth.

Differences in expectations concerning authority, self-expression, and family obligations may shape the experiences of young immigrants from former Soviet Union countries. Some may encounter tensions between expectations of obedience and restraint within their families and more informal modes of communication in Israeli peer or educational settings. These patterns vary within both societies and should not be interpreted as fixed or opposing cultural characteristics. Cultural transitions may involve misunderstanding and intergenerational tension as young people navigate changing social expectations (Laor & Muchtar, 2023). At the same time, young immigrants actively negotiate these expectations, maintaining valued practices,

questioning others, and developing ways of expressing themselves across different settings.

The participants in the clubs encounter different coaching philosophies and authority structures. In the Soviet sports system, judo training has traditionally been characterized by a highly hierarchical and centralized model. Coaches were typically perceived as unquestioned authority figures, and training environments emphasized discipline, obedience, repetition, and endurance (Carmi, 2017). Athletes were socialized to accept strict coaching methods and limited dialogue. By contrast, the Israeli coaching style, especially at the youth level, tends to be more informal. Coaches may encourage athlete input, foster open communication, and place greater emphasis on personal expression (Muchtar, 2025). For immigrant athletes accustomed to rigid structures, this shift can create confusion, insecurity, or a perception of insufficient seriousness or discipline in training.

The importance of sport as a tool for integration in the Soviet Union

In the Soviet Union and other Soviet bloc countries, the state promoted sport as a pathway to social mobility. Outstanding athletes from various ethnic groups and peoples received lavish benefits (Carmi, 2017). Outstanding athletes in the Soviet Union became a special elite in society, and sport occupied a central place in the Soviet political system, where almost every process and event occurred under the state's watchful eye. It can be assumed that even in the multinational and multi-ethnic Soviet Union, where many did not want to assimilate, sport served as a tool for integration not involving loss of national-ethnic uniqueness and received encouragement from the state that saw it as an effective tool for its own needs. The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 was followed by large-scale Jewish migration to Israel. About one million Soviet Jews immigrated to the Jewish state, including hundreds of athletes, coaches, physical education teachers, and sports scientists. Sports culture in the Soviet Union was very different from sports culture in Israel. Ostensibly, sport could serve as a bridge between immigrants and Israelis, but the gap between sports culture in the Soviet Union and that in Israel was too large. For young immigrant athletes, cultural contrast led to challenges in navigating social dynamics within training groups. Language barriers, particularly during the initial stages of immigration, further exacerbated these challenges and intensified feelings of isolation (Godor, 2025). Many immigrants chose to participate in ethnic sports clubs where they could preserve familiar behavior patterns and integrate. Researchers concluded that Israeli sport did not succeed in exploiting the full potential of Russian immigrants and did not reap long-term benefits from their abilities (Carmi, 2017).

Integration of immigrants in Israel

Immigrants from former Soviet Union countries arrived in Israel from a society that underwent upheavals and major changes. Immigration during change in the country of origin creates even more complex problems beyond social-cultural differences between the country of origin and the absorbing society, as there is rigidity aimed at preserving the old and familiar. The danger for the child is in withdrawal into a subculture, causing feelings of alienation and estrangement toward the absorbing society, or a complete break and collapse of supervision and regulation systems, which may lead to anomie among youth (Roer-Strier & Rosenthal, 2001). Anomie is a state of disintegration of social norms within the individual. This state is created when there is no match between accessibility to goals or resources and the values society sanctifies. This causes confusion within the individual, and the individual disconnects from society and its norms. The phenomenon of anomie characterizes many immigrants who have difficulty adapting to the values of the absorbing society (Edelstein, 2008).

The difficulties children face in the education system led some to covert and overt dropout, manifested in loss of school supervisory capacity over their behavior and different connection of these children to other groups in similar situations, especially among their countrymen. Some youth feel their parents imposed immigration and its associated difficulties on them, but because according to parents it was done for their benefit, they have difficulty expressing their anger at parents who placed them in distressing situations, such as loss of the peer group they had originally, loss of mother tongue, loss of the familiar and known, and academic and social difficulties. Anger is usually directed toward the absorbing society, which caused parents' professional status decline and harmed youth, especially socially and culturally (Edelstein, 2008).

Sport as a socialization agent

Research shows that immigrants integrate into the target society through integration in certain sports representing nativeness, seniority, belonging, and connection to the values of the particular society, such as baseball in the United States and football as a melting pot in France, Argentina, and Brazil (Coalter, 2021). Sports sociologists assume that engagement in sport according to accepted social game rules and in accepted social frameworks affects the development of certain character traits, internalization of certain norms and values, and various social achievements (Feigen, 2004). Researchers note that individual and team sports are mechanisms of social integration, especially due to the mobility inherent in sports participation itself. Sport, it seems, fulfills a highly valuable role in social integration because it unites and arouses excitement in all layers of society throughout its length and depth. The excitement is not one-time, but repeats itself periodically, thereby helping to strengthen integration. Various countries dedicate extensive media attention to presenting personal success stories of immigrant athletes who achieved success in various sports (Godor, 2025).

In the United States, 14% of the population is foreign-born, a ratio that has steadily increased over recent decades. Immigrants are represented across all professional sports leagues in the U.S. In some of the leagues, foreign-born athletes constitute a majority (Young et al., 2025), including the National Hockey League

(approximately 69%) and Major League Soccer (about 57%). Sport is recognized in the U.S. as a mechanism for social integration. Community-based programs and public initiatives aim to promote physical activity among migrant populations as part of broader inclusion and integration strategies. Many European states also actively promote the inclusion of immigrants in organized sports clubs through national and local policies, often framing sport as part of educational, social cohesion, and integration agendas (Peachey et al., 2019). Research focusing on migrants and refugees highlights the potential of sport not only as a form of physical activity but also as a platform for social interaction, network building, psychological well-being, and community integration (Godor, 2025).

The social benefits of sports activities include promoting the ability to cooperate and mutual solidarity, cultivating leadership ability, developing evaluation and criticism tools, increasing motivation within an organized rules framework, and choosing from a variety of activities according to abilities and personal inclination (Aharoni et al., 2013). It appears, therefore, that sport has an important role as an integrator between societies composed of different classes, from different ethnic and religious groups, and from different nationalities. These societies use sport, whether intentionally or accidentally, to strengthen their boundaries externally while simultaneously abolishing boundaries and contradictions within and increasing integration of groups considered minorities.

Judo, one of the Olympic sports and central to this article, raises several complex social and pedagogical issues. The primary objective in Olympic combat sports is to overcome the opponent through physical mastery, demanding extreme physical effort, refined motor skills, strength, and endurance (Carmi, 2017; Oftedal, 2006). Bodily and mental self-control constitute an integral dimension of martial arts and serve as a profound source of pride for fighters (Jefferson, 1998). Yet society's stance toward the discipline has often remained ambivalent. On the one hand, combat sports can provide a constructive educational alternative to unstructured street life (Fulton, 2011), fostering civic values that transcend the sporting arena to serve the collective welfare (Oftedal, 2006). On the other hand, combat sports inherently involve bodily subjugation and physical risk (Fulton, 2011; Wacquant, 1995). The spatial demarcation of the arena is thus ethically decisive, as physical techniques that would be deemed unacceptable outside the club gain formal legitimacy within its boundaries (Oftedal, 2006).

Crucially, for a sociological reading of martial arts, judo cannot be evaluated merely as an interchangeable physical activity. The sport operates through a distinct spatial and pedagogical architecture that actively structures socialization. Sociologically, the dojo functions as a liminal space (Bowman, 2021; Judkins, 2018) where exterior social hierarchies, linguistic barriers, and ethnic tensions are temporarily suspended. Within this space, bodily engagement is regulated by the ritual grammar of *rei* (formal bowing and mutual courtesy), establishing an ethic of deference, mutual vulnerability, and reciprocal respect (Channon & Matthews, 2015). Judo's pedagogy balances *kata* (prearranged formal exercises demanding discipline and exactitude) with *randori* (free sparring requiring dynamic tactical adaptability). Furthermore, the *sensei-deshi* (teacher-disciple) relationship provides immigrant youth with a reliable model of moral authority, while the meritocratic ladder of *kyū* and *dan* grades offers a transparent mechanism of status acquisition. Consequently, bodily mastery within the club is bound to moral discipline rather than unrestrained aggression.

Beyond the question of the morality of martial arts, complex social issues are also reflected in them. Investigation of Olympic combat sports raises issues related to social power relations. The social capital of this field is exclusively linked to the formation of male hegemony with traditional masculine values (Fulton, 2011). The socialization process of athletes often involves normalization of pain and injuries as positive sports values. These values also relate to the construction of masculine identity (Muchtar, 2025). These sports often associate masculinity with physical strength, toughness, and dominance, placing bodily appearance and athletic ability at the center of practitioners' identities. Hence, a subculture is created for practitioners with which they are identified, where the judoka's body is their asset (Coalter, 2021). Strength and ability are achieved through a strict training regimen striving to create masculine perfection and superiority. This emphasis on bodily discipline and physical performance can be interpreted in relation to ideals of hegemonic masculinity (Jefferson, 1998). The sociocultural study of martial arts extends beyond questions of violence to examine how these practices are constituted through cultural representations, historical processes, and relations of power (Bowman, 2015).

A review of studies on the social implications of martial arts determined that they have potential for improving social skills and social status due to belonging to the sports framework (Vertonghen & Theeboom, 2010). Therefore, the research question was posed: How does judo contribute to the integration of immigrant youth from former Soviet Union countries into Israeli society?

The differential opportunity perspective provides the principal theoretical lens for interpreting the findings (Cloward & Ohlin, 2013). It directs attention to how participants perceived the club as a setting offering access to valued activities, relationships, and recognition, without presuming prior involvement in delinquency. Within this framework, solidarity and social capital serve as supporting concepts for interpreting experiences of belonging and relational support. Masculinity provides a critical lens on the expectations of toughness and emotional restraint that may complicate these opportunities. Anomie remains a background concept concerning normative disruption rather than an outcome assessed by this study.

METHODS

This research was conducted within the qualitative paradigm, emphasizing holistic investigation of phenomena in their context while addressing subjective interpretations of these phenomena. The qualitative approach enables understanding human experiences through narratives people share about various aspects of their lives (Shkedi, 2003). This means qualitative researchers study things in their natural location and try to find meaning or interpret phenomena in terms people use (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The research objective was to examine the contribution of judo clubs to integration and social mobility of immigrants from former Soviet Union countries. Accordingly, a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis was used, enabling a rich and in-depth perspective of social processes while based on narratives common among practitioners and coaches in the clubs studied.

Tools

In-depth interviews allow researchers to explore participants' experiences and the meanings they attach to them. This interview is like a conversation in which interviewer and interviewee together develop the meanings of certain topics. While a formal interview includes standardized and pre-planned questions, the in-depth interview is characterized by an open style that allows interviewees to structure their story with minimal guidance (Shkedi, 2003).

This study conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 35 participants and professionals in judo clubs, aiming to understand how the interviewee experiences the sport's contribution to their life in social and educational contexts. The interview began with background questions about participants' names, ages, countries of origin, occupations, years of judo experience, and length of membership in their current clubs. Subsequently, anchor questions were presented to subjects that served in previous studies (Hartman, 2001) dealing with the positive contribution of sports frameworks (for example, studies examining the effectiveness of the "Midnight Basketball" program in the United States).

Research Participants

The study included 35 male interviewees from three judo clubs in Israel nationwide (Beer Sheva, Tel Aviv, Haifa), including 25 judokas and 10 professionals in the field (coaches and club managers). A methodological consideration relates to the gender composition of the research sample, which consists exclusively of male participants. While this limits the applicability of the findings to female immigrant athletes, it aligns with the sociological inquiry into traditional masculine values within combat sports. The exclusive focus on men allows for a deeper examination of how physical toughness and resilience are cultivated among young male immigrants as part of their social integration. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as reflecting a distinctly male socialization process within the judo club environment. Future studies would benefit from including female judokas to explore the intersection of gender, immigration, and athletic participation.

All interviewees and their families immigrated to Israel from former Soviet Union countries. All clubs studied had a high proportion of practitioners from former Soviet Union countries, and club graduates are among the outstanding in the sport in Israel, including Israeli champions, national team members, and international competition champions (for example, Peter Paltchik, gold medalist at the 2020 European Championship). Seventy percent of the athletes come from low-income families.

The age range of judokas in the study is 19-25 years (average age is 22.8). All athletes immigrated to Israel as children (the average years of residing in Israel is 14 years). Even athletes who immigrated to Israel at a relatively young age (age 3) define their family as an immigrant family and emphasize the Russian culture and education they received at home. Their judo experience ranged from 2 to 12 years, with a mean of 5.5 years. Field experts were all former judokas; their age range is 27-73 years (average age is 39.8). Their experience in sport ranges from 17 to 44 years (average - 27.4 years).

The sample included judokas and club professionals to explore two perspectives on participation in the clubs. Judokas provided accounts of their experiences, relationships, and the meanings they attributed to training, while coaches and club managers offered perspectives on educational practices, club expectations, and their interactions with athletes. Including both groups enabled the study to examine how participation was understood by those involved in training and those responsible for organizing it. These accounts represent perspectives from within the club environment; parents were not interviewed, and the study therefore does not capture their views on athletes' experiences or family–club relationships.

It is worth noting a methodological and conceptual reservation regarding the literature review focus on the large immigration waves of the 1990s. In contrast, the participants in the current study immigrated to Israel as children at a later stage, placing them in the group defined in the literature as the 1.5 generation of immigrants. Researchers point out that these young individuals develop complex and dynamic identities over the course of their lives. According to Leybenson et al. (2024), the identity formation of this generation involves a combination of ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and national components that together form a hybrid identity possessing Soviet-Jewish, Israeli, and Western characteristics. The integration processes of immigrants who arrived as children differ from those of adult immigrants because they are shaped within a dual cultural space from the beginning. This distinction requires a more precise reading of the findings, with the understanding that the judo club serves as an arena for negotiating this hybrid identity rather than merely a linear platform for cultural assimilation.

Procedure

In the first stage of data collection, in-depth interviews were conducted with 25 judokas and 10 experts (all above the age of 18). Each interview lasted about an hour. The interview opened with a general explanation about the study and the interview method. First, several demographic questions were asked to obtain background about the interviewee and help create a comfortable atmosphere toward more substantive questions. At the interview, interviewees were assured that no identifying details would be provided and that interview data would be used solely for conducting the research. The conversation with each interviewee was recorded and subsequently transcribed for content analysis. The interview transcripts were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, with individual statements serving as units of analysis (Shkedi, 2003). To ensure trustworthiness and minimize individual bias, coding was conducted iteratively until theoretical saturation was reached, meaning no new conceptual dimensions emerged from the narratives. The initial coding architecture was cross-checked and verified by an independent secondary researcher, and final thematic configurations were triangulated against the expert interviews to ensure internal consistency.

Regarding ethical considerations, IRB approval was obtained prior to data collection. Given the vulnerability of the population and the potential elicitation of sensitive disclosures (such as contact with law enforcement and substance use), all participants provided written informed consent, all identifying details were completely anonymized, and records were stored securely to guarantee absolute confidentiality

Research limitations

Qualitative research emphasizes the need for subjective understanding or interpretation of social phenomena; therefore, one of the main weaknesses of qualitative research is the question of research validity. The weakness of internal validity originates from its most prominent characteristic, which is the researcher's presence as an observer at the site of occurrence and indirect documentation methods. However, this is also the source of the method's strength; the researcher's presence at the research site and data collection over time enable continuous and comparative analysis that refines and confirms the match between scientific categories and participants' life reality. The interview, constituting an important data source, is formulated closer to participants' language (Tzabar Ben-Yehoshua, 1990). External validity refers to the degree to which abstract structures and theoretical insights generated within qualitative inquiry can inform understandings of comparable contexts. In accordance with qualitative methodology, the objective is not statistical generalizability across the entire immigrant population, but rather the generation of a nuanced, contextualized understanding of social processes within specific institutional settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A fundamental structural limitation of this study concerns potential selection bias. The research sites were deliberately selected partly due to their track record of high athletic achievement and national championship production, and data collection relied exclusively on active club members and current coaches. Consequently, the findings inevitably capture the experiences of those who adapted successfully, persisted in their training, and derived sustained personal benefit from the club environment. The structural absence of former members, particularly those who dropped out or found the rigid disciplinary demands incompatible with their needs, means that the strongly affirmative outcomes reported here must be recognized as reflecting a self-selected cohort of persistent practitioners. Future research should intentionally incorporate dropouts and marginal participants to construct a more balanced appraisal of the limitations and exclusionary pressures within martial arts environments.

FINDINGS

The analysis identified several categories reflecting how participants understood the role of judo clubs in their lives.

Category 1: Mental and psychological support

Participants described judo as a source of support in coping with social and emotional difficulties. One expert noted, "Some of the children arrive here confused, not belonging anywhere. On our mat they find a quiet home." Another expert explicitly stated that sport provides solutions to practitioners' social difficulties at the club:

> Almost every child who enters here is looking for something. There are those who need a big brother, a father, a hug, a kind word. And there are those who come looking for strength to stand on their own and fight.

One practitioner noted the power of engaging in martial arts within the club framework: "Training gives me strength to deal with problems. This place gave me the ability to change things myself." Another issue that arose is improvement in the sense of self-efficacy, as one practitioner claimed: "At school I always felt like an immigrant, don't speak the language well, and everyone treats me with contempt. Today I know how strong I am and how much power I have. I know I can do things." Another practitioner claimed, "Martial arts taught me that with great power comes great responsibility. It stays with you even outside the mat, in the neighborhood and at school, helping parents at home."

Alongside these affirmative accounts, the data also revealed significant emotional strain and ambivalence. Several participants underscored that the dojo was not an unproblematic sanctuary, but a demanding space characterized by intense physical pressure and acute fear of failure. One judoka reflected on the psychological toll of this discipline:

> There were periods when the pressure was unbearable. You carry the expectations of your parents, who gave up everything when they immigrated, and the coach demands absolute obedience. When I suffered a

> shoulder injury before an important tournament, I felt completely abandoned and worthless."

This countervailing narrative highlights that the authoritarian coaching heritage and the relentless demand for emotional stoicism can exacerbate internal distress when athletes struggle to maintain elite performance standards.

Category 2: Social mobility

Statements belonging to this category emphasize judo's contribution to cultivating a value system encouraging achievement and breaking boundaries between different social categories. One practitioner stated, "I learned to see every training and every competition as an opportunity. An opportunity to prove myself, an opportunity to show everyone what I'm worth, an opportunity to win." Another participant claimed, "On the mat I have the opportunity to prove myself. The coach teaches us to believe in ourselves and proves that if you train hard you can succeed at everything." One coach claimed, "What we teach them on the mat should help them in life too; that's how I see things. That they learn that if you work hard and persist, good things happen in life too."

Category 3: Integration

Statements belonging to this category indicate the sport's contribution to the sense of integration and social inclusion of immigrant youth in Israeli society. This happens through competitions accompanying this participation and encouraging social cohesion by crossing ethnic or class boundaries. One coach claimed, "On the mat there are no Russians or Israelis; everyone works together. Everyone is one family." Similarly, one practitioner claimed, "On the mat I feel at home; I feel equal to everyone. In judo everyone speaks the same language. When they say *Hajime*, everyone understands." This testimony illustrates how the codified ritual and linguistic structure of the dojo actively suspend the verbal and social barriers immigrant youth frequently encounter in the wider host society. The traditional Japanese command *Hajime* ("begin") functions on the *tatami* as an inclusive *lingua franca*. It immediately redirects the interaction away from spoken proficiency in Hebrew or Russian toward shared bodily literacy and mutual comprehension. Through adherence to common martial commands and interactive rituals, native and newcomer practitioners occupy a posture of structural equality, fostering an immediate sense of cohesion that transcends ethnic divisions.

The practitioners' pride in achievements of former Soviet Union immigrants in the sport is prominent, and they serve as role models and positive examples of integration:

> I want to be like Peter Paltchik, the Olympic athlete, when I grow up. I want to be on the podium; the Israeli flag waves, and they don't check if he's an immigrant or born in Israel, if he has an accent or not. We all celebrated with him at the European championship and saw how everyone in the whole country celebrated with him.

Category 4: Prevention of delinquency and social deviation

Statements belonging to this category indicate the sport's contribution to keeping immigrant youth away from street life. One coach responded, "I leave training and see what homes some of them return to. I make every effort to give them an alternative, teach them it's possible to live differently." Other accounts described how involvement in judo helped participants distance themselves from peer environments they regarded as harmful. For example, one practitioner said:

> Judo changed my life. As simple as that. It taught me to disconnect from all the garbage around and come every day to battle on the training mat. I take hits in training and get back on my feet. That's how I feel in life too: you take a hit and get back on your feet.

Another recurring theme was the contrast between unstructured leisure time before joining the club and the routine and sense of purpose associated with training. One coach explained, "When we opened the class many years ago, we went through immigrant neighborhoods and recruited children who were looking for a sense of direction." Another practitioner clarified that lack of opportunities in his residential area previously even caused legal trouble: "A few years ago police picked up me and several friends in the evening in the public garden, drinking alcohol. Today there's no chance I'd touch it; I have more important things to deal with." Another practitioner also noted, "Until I got here, I would finish school, go home, and mainly mess around on the phone. Today I arrive even before my training to help the coach with training younger ones. I enjoy being here."

Category 5: The Club as a tool for values education

Statements belonging to this category indicate martial arts values expressed in classes. Most statements emphasize the field's importance as a tool for informal education. One coach emphasized this point: "I feel like an additional teacher. I teach them to restrain themselves, to love others. Judo teaches love for others." Coaches linked their educational role to judo's pedagogical traditions. One coach said, "Jigoro Kano, the sport's founder, was a teacher, and I feel like I'm continuing his path. That's what we feel in every training."

From the coaches' words, it emerges that within values education, there is importance placed on proper behavior of practitioners. Thus, one coach presents his basic worldview: "First be a human being, then be a fighter. I teach my students to behave respectfully toward each other and respect the sport and competition." Coaches aimed to help athletes develop skills and values they could apply beyond the mat. In this spirit, one practitioner tried to summarize coaches' true purpose: "The sensei teaches us about life. It's not just judo; he teaches how to deal with losses, with frustration and anger. I learn things on the mat that help me everywhere."

DISCUSSION

This paper examined the role of judo clubs as frameworks that may assist in integration and social mobility of immigrants from former Soviet Union countries. To trace the role the club fulfills in young people's lives, in-depth interviews were conducted with them and with field experts. In analyzing the research findings, several cohesive categories emerged across the interviews, reflecting prominent trends in how participants made sense of their athletic experiences and social trajectories. Importantly, these narratives capture the subjective meanings articulated by active judokas and coaches. The accounts displayed a notable degree of coherence and positive evaluation regarding the club environment. Rather than reflecting an absence of personal challenges, this thematic alignment points to the strong institutional attachment and shared normative values that develop among dedicated practitioners. In combat sports communities, sustained commitment over time often cultivates a deep identification with the club and its ethos. At the same time, this qualitative alignment should be understood within its context, as the narratives represent those who successfully integrated into the sporting framework and found meaningful stability within its structure.

Cultural gaps in coaching norms, communication styles, and developmental philosophies can pose significant challenges, but as the research findings suggest, awareness, dialogue, and adaptive coaching practices are essential for promoting both athletic success and social integration. Athletes from former Soviet states often come from cultural contexts in which communication is relatively direct, emotionally restrained, and mission-oriented. In Israel, interpersonal communication is generally more expressive and informal, both inside and outside the club (Muchtar, 2025).

The potential social contribution of sport should be distinguished from the assumption that participation necessarily produces inclusion or wider social change. Coalter's (2021) critical approach to sport-for-development directs attention to the conditions and processes through which benefits may arise, rather than treating them as inherent outcomes of sporting participation. In the present study, references to Peter Paltchik illustrate how the achievements of an immigrant athlete can acquire symbolic significance in participants' accounts of recognition and belonging. His success offered an image of identification with Israeli society in which immigrant background was perceived as compatible with public recognition and national pride. Such narratives illuminate participants' understandings and aspirations; they do not establish that judo provides equal opportunities for all immigrants or that sporting achievement translates into broader social mobility.

These dynamics align with Cloward and Ohlin's (2013) differential opportunity framework, which emphasizes the provision of structured, legitimate pathways to support immigrant youth integration and foster personal resilience. The interview data reflect perceived contributions to social inclusion, self-efficacy, and purposeful engagement, consistent with wider research on organized sport environments (Coalter, 2021). However, these sociological processes become fully intelligible when interpreted through the native philosophical principles established by judo's founder, Jigoro Kano: *jita kyōei* (mutual welfare and benefit) and *seiryoku zen'yō* (maximum efficiency with minimal effort) (Kano, 2005). The principle of *jita kyōei* articulates a functional model of social solidarity: on the tatami, an athlete cannot develop technical competence without a cooperative partner who alternates dynamically between roles (*uke* and *tori*). This interdependence offers a possible interpretation of the mutual support described by participants. Durkheim's (1947) concept of solidarity helps illuminate this relational dimension, although the interview accounts do not establish a reduction in anomie. Concurrently, *seiryoku zen'yō* provides practitioners with an embodied ethos for the disciplined channelling of physical and emotional force (Yabune et al., 1997). Rather than promoting unrestrained masculine aggression, the discipline requires youth to master situational awareness, redirect incoming force, and exert emotional self-restraint. For immigrant adolescents navigating the disorienting pressures of acculturation and perceived marginalization, the internalization of these native martial principles may offer psychological anchors and mechanisms for self-regulation (Lindell-Postigo et al., 2023).

From research findings it can be argued that judo training actually serves as a source of social solidarity and strengthens social belonging and integration. This is also evident from categories referring to the club as a family, where one can see a sense of belonging exists among group members.

Findings also suggest a "masculine culture" in the clubs. Judokas are expected to train through discomfort, suppress expressions of vulnerability, and demonstrate commitment by enduring intense physical demands. Displays of pain or fear may be interpreted as signs of weakness. This principle aligns with broader Israeli cultural narratives that valorize resilience and readiness for confrontation, particularly in relation to military service and national security (Laor & Muchtar, 2023).

In conclusion, participants described judo clubs as meaningful sources of support, confidence, and belonging. Their accounts suggest that relationships and shared practices within these settings may provide resources for navigating experiences of immigration and social inclusion. The study thus highlights the perceived contribution of club participation without establishing its wider or long-term effects on integration into Israeli society.

The integration of immigrants into organized sport has the potential to generate significant long-term value beyond immediate physical and recreational benefits. It can be a powerful social institution through which values, norms, and forms of civic engagement are learned, negotiated, and internalized over time (Godor, 2025). Sport can help to foster social capital and belonging. Through shared training routines, competition, and teamwork, migrants are able to form meaningful social networks with peers, coaches, and institutions in the host country. These

connections can promote a sense of inclusion, which are critical foundations for long-term social cohesion. Over time, such experiences can translate into stronger identification with the host society and increased civic participation (Coalter, 2021).

Ethics and Consent

Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection. All participants were adults and provided written informed consent to participate in the study. Identifying details were removed from the interview material, and records were stored securely to protect participants' confidentiality, particularly given the sensitive nature of the personal experiences disclosed.

Authors' Contributions

Ofer Muchtar led the conceptualization and design of the study, data collection, data analysis, and preparation of the original draft. Orr Levental contributed to the independent parallel analysis of the data, editing of the manuscript draft, and revision of the manuscript in response to peer review.

Declaration of competing interests

The authors affirm that they had no competing interests relevant to the work underpinning this manuscript.

Declaration of artificial intelligence use

The authors affirm that no artificial intelligence applications were used in the preparation of this manuscript.

REFERENCES

Aharoni, H., Nagar, H., & Elgavish, L. (2013). Leadership in physical education and sport: Training and development model at Kay College. *Bulletin of MOFET Institute*, *50*, 32-36. https://doi.org/10.5771/2747-6073-2013-4-36

Bowman, P. (2015). *Martial arts studies: Disrupting disciplinary boundaries*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA.

Bowman, P. (2021). *The invention of martial arts: Popular culture between Asia and America*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197540336.001.0001

Carmi, U. (2017). Absorbing coaches and athletes from the former Soviet Union in Israel. *The International Journal of History of Sport*, *34*(16), 1719-1738. https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2018.1491553

Channon, A., & Matthews, C. R. (2015). Approaching the gendered phenomenon of 'women warriors'. In A. Channon & C. R. Matthews (Eds.), *Global perspectives on women in combat sports: Women warriors around the world* (pp. 1-21). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137439369_1

Cloward, R. A., & Ohlin, L. E. (2013). *Delinquency and opportunity: A study of delinquent gangs*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315007274

Coalter, F. (2021). *Sport-for-development: What game are we playing?* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Collins, M. (2012). *Sport and social exclusion*. Routledge.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2000). *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Sage.

Durkheim, E. (1947). *The division of labor in society*. Free Press.

Edelstein, A. (2008). Use of psychoactive substances and accompanying delinquency among youth from former Soviet Union countries immigrants. *From Disconnection to Integration*, *15*, 45-84.

Feigen, N. (2004). Socialization through sport. In R. Lidor (Ed.), *Motor behavior: Psychological and sociological aspects* (pp. 147-176). Magnes.

Fulton, A. (2011). *The moral foundation of boxing*. Wiley-Blackwell.

Galily, Y., Lidor, R., & Ben-Porat, A. (2009). *In the playground: Sport and society at the beginning of the third millennium*. The Open University.

Godor, B. P. (2025). Cultivating resilience in youth: assessing the psychological benefits of sport-based development programs. *Journal of Sport for Development*, *13*(1), 97-109.

Hartman, D. (2001). *Midnight basketball: Race, sport, and neoliberal social policy*. University of Chicago Press.

Jefferson, T. (1998). Muscle, "hard men," and "Iron" Mike Tyson: Reflections on desire, anxiety and the embodiment of masculinity. *Body & Society*, *4*(1), 77-98. https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X98004001005

Judkins, B. N. (2018). Liminoid longings and liminal belonging. In P. Bowman (Ed.), *The martial arts studies reader* (pp. 57-70). Bloomsbury Publishing PLC.

Kano, J. (1932). The contribution of Judo to education. *The Journal of Health and Physical Education*, *3*(9), 37-58. https://doi.org/10.1080/23267240.1932.10622482

Kano, J. (2005). *Mind over Muscle*. Kodansha International.

Laor, T., & Muchtar, O. (2023). "The Shawshank Redemption": An analysis of prisoner and prison radio. *Israel Affairs*, *29*(5), 983-1001. https://doi.org/10.1080/13537121.2023.2247656

Leybenson, M., Gutman, M., & Yemini, M. (2024). Crossing the borders: Dynamic identity variations of former Israeli Russian-speaking migrants of the 1.5 generation. *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, *39*(3), 495-512. https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2022.2151033

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage. https://doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767(85)90062-8

Lindell-Postigo, D., Zurita-Ortega, F., Melguizo-Ibáñez, E., González-Valero, G., Ortiz-Franco, M., & Ubago-Jiménez, J. L. (2023). Effectiveness of a judo intervention programme on the psychosocial area in secondary school education students. *Sports, 11*(8), 140. https://doi.org/10.3390/sports11080140

Muchtar, O. (2025). Sport as a coping method for stress and anxiety among athletes during Swords of Iron war. *Israel Affairs*, 1-15. https://doi.org/10.1080/13537121.2025.2571490

Oftedal, E. (2006). *The morality of boxing*. Norwegian School of Sport Sciences.

Peachey, J. W., Schulenkorf, N., & Spaaij, R. (2019). Sport for social change: Bridging the theory-practice divide. *Journal of Sport Management*, *33*(5), 361-365. https://doi.org/10.1123/jsm.2019-0291

Roer-Strier, D., & Rosenthal, M. (2001). Cross-cultural transition and its effects on parenting and child socialization. In M. Lissak & A. Leshem (Eds.), *From Russia to Israel: Identity and culture in transition*. Hakibbutz Hameuchad.

Shkedi, A. (2003). *Words trying to touch: Qualitative research - Theory and application*. Ramot.

Tzabar Ben-Yehoshua, N. (1990). *Qualitative research in teaching and learning*. Masada Publishing.

Vertonghen, J., & Theeboom, M. (2010). The social-psychological outcomes of martial arts practice among youth: A review. *Journal of Sports Science and Medicine*, *9*(4), 528-537.

Wacquant, L. (1995). Pugs at work: Bodily capital and bodily labour among professional boxers. *Body & Society*, *1*(1), 65-93. https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X95001001005

Yabune, T., Okada, S., Yamasaki, S., Nagaki, K., & Deguchi, T. (1997). A study on the judo principles, the meanings of Seiryoku-Zenyo and Jita-Kyoei, and the degrees of present young judo players' understanding on those theories. *Res J Budo, 30*(2), 9-26.

Young, D., Block, K., & Gibbs, L. (2025). Developing social capital through sport? The case for an intersectional lens. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, *60*(4), 634-649. https://doi.org/10.1177/10126902241278743

MARTIAL ARTS STUDIES

ABOUT THE JOURNAL

Martial Arts Studies is the official journal of the Martial Arts Studies Association. Visit https://www.martialartsstudies.org/ to learn more about the Association, including conference details, publications, and memberships.

Martial Arts Studies is an open access journal, which means that all content is available without charge to the user or his/her institution. You are allowed to read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of the articles in this journal without asking prior permission from either the publisher or the author.

ISSN: 2057-5696

The journal is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Original copyright remains with the contributing author and a citation should be made when the article is quoted, used or referred to in another work.

Martial Arts Studies is an imprint of Cardiff University Press, an innovative open-access publisher of academic research, where 'open-access' means free for both readers and writers.
cardiffuniversitypress.org

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Peter J. Katz	*University Hospitals & Case Western Reserve University*

EDITORS

Emily Dobrich	*Western University & University of Toronto*
Xiujie Ma	*Chengdu Sport University*
Martin J. Meyer	*University of Bayreuth*
Wriddhibrata Saha	*Shiv Nadar University*
Thabata Telles	*University of Maia & Polytechnic Institute of Maia*
Luke White	*Middlesex University*

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT

Jiongyan Huang	*Cardiff University*

FOUNDING EDITORS

Paul Bowman	*Cardiff University*
Benjamin N. Judkins	*Cornell University*

EDITORIAL ADVISORY PANEL

Oleg Benesch	*University of York*
Stephen Chan	*SOAS University of London*
Greg Downey	*Macquarie University*
D.S. Farrer	*University of Guam*
Adam Frank	*University of Central Arkansas*
Thomas A. Green	*Texas A&M University*
T. J. Hinrichs	*Cornell University*
Leon Hunt	*Brunel University of London*
Felipe P. Jocano Jr	*University of the Philippines*
Gina Marchetti	*Hong Kong University*
Meaghan Morris	*The University of Sydney*
Daniel Mroz	*University of Ottawa*
Meir Shahar	*Tel Aviv University*
Dale Spencer	*Carleton University*
Douglas Wile	*Alverno College*