

# Breaking Barriers: The Psychological Impact of Mikado Jiu Jitsu in Overcoming Societal Challenges

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## Abstract

Over time martial arts have played a role in empowering citizens to better manage their lifestyles and fitness. Additionally, they have proven to be an avenue for individuals to improve their mental health and improve their confidence in handling conflict scenarios. Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu (BJJ) has seen a significant rise in popularity around the world since its introduction through mainstream media, for example, in *Lethal Weapon 1*, Mel Gibson uses a BJJ technique to best his enemy in the final scene and BJJ was proven to be the single most dominant martial art in events like the earlier Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) events in the nineties which encouraged representatives from different martial arts disciplines to compete against each other to identify the one single dominant style. Unlike in Western countries, BJJ has not been as widely accepted and practised in Eastern countries, especially, in Islamic countries which may be attributed to the close contact nature of the sport that includes rolling around on the ground. In such countries, women have been the biggest laggards in practising BJJ.

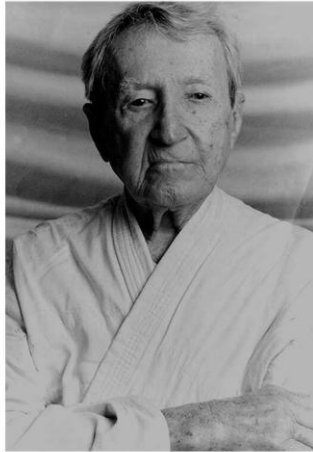
Pakistan is an example of a country where the take-up and practice of BJJ have lagged in comparison to other countries. Pakistan is an Islamic country which is heavily embedded in the teachings of the Holy Quran when it comes to government and legal policy for citizens. Practising the art of BJJ by women has been frowned upon in Pakistan due to its close contact nature, however, there have been pockets of resistance amongst women groups against this established cultural norm. Professor Shehryar Qureshi the owner of the academy of Mikado Jiu Jitsu in Lahore, has supported such resistance from women groups by providing women and other groups with a friendly environment to train and improve their fitness and skills. Shehryar for around a decade was a resident in Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia where he was introduced to BJJ while pursuing a university education. Shehryar started training BJJ from 2011 onwards where he enjoyed success in the form of winning medals at several national level competitions. His BJJ journey eventually led to him receiving his Blackbelt in 2024 and then opening his academy in Lahore, Pakistan. Shehryar was able to overcome the initial challenges of opening a gym which included established rivals, cultural barriers and the overall cost of setting up by adopting an innovative and dynamic approach throughout his operations. Mikado Jiu Jitsu became a profitable business within 6 months of its inception which may have been attributed to Shehryar instilling an inclusive environment at Mikado Jiu Jitsu which welcomed people from diverse backgrounds. Additionally, Shehryar adopted innovative marketing methods to attract new customers which included online testimonials and Instagram videos featuring student experiences.

This paper explores the regular activities undertaken by Shehryar to run the gym. An open-ended questions-based interview is conducted with Shehryar to better understand his position as the leader of this exciting new business. In the interview, Shehryar highlights the benefits of BJJ to the wider population in terms of health, well-being and community by sharing examples of BJJ empowering citizens from vulnerable groups in Pakistan. The case study also hopes to engage and challenge readers in proposing a plan for Mikado Jiu Jitsu to move on to the next step in ensuring the survival and growth of the business. A plan may involve a future expansion of the business into the *MENA (Middle East and North Africa)* region into a nation like the United Arab Emirates (UAE) where this market is underpinned by the same religious values but unlike Pakistan, the region is blessed with groundbreaking infrastructure and significant government investment. The case study concludes by outlining recommendations which may inform different stakeholders in ensuring an improved future for the business. Therefore, in terms of the *Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*, Shehryar's innovative approach to business aligns with *SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure)* and Shehryar's vision of promoting an inclusive environment within the gym regardless of individuals' gender, social and economic backgrounds aligns with *SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities)*.

**Keywords:** BJJ; Pakistan; MENA; SDGs; Mikado Jiu Jitsu.

## 1. Introduction

Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu (BJJ) is a grappling art consisting of elements from freestyle wrestling, Sambo and Judo. The art of BJJ was developed by Carlos, Oswaldo, Gastao Jr, and Helio Gracie around 1925 in Brazil (360 Brazilian Jiu Jitsu Academy, 2019). Carlos was first introduced to elements of submission grappling by Mitsuyo Maeda in 1917. The first BJJ school was founded by Carlos Gracie in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1925 (Todd, 2020). An image of Carlos Gracie is illustrated in Fig. 1.



**Fig. 1.** Carlos Gracie

Carlos shown in Fig. 1 was believed to be a driving force behind the BJJ revolution which came to prominence through widestream media in the late 80s in movies like Lethal Weapon where Mel Gibson applied a BJJ move against his opponent (Gomez, 2020). The superiority of BJJ against other martial arts was proven in the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) 1 by Royce Gracie in 1993 (Gomez, 2020). Royce bested numerous styles in the process of winning the UFC 1 tournament. Royce's feat demonstrated the effectiveness of BJJ in enabling a smaller combatant to overcome bigger and stronger opponents (BJJ Heroes, 2019). An image of Royce Gracie is illustrated in Fig. 2.



**Fig. 2.** Royce Gracie winning UFC 1

As shown in Fig. 2, Royce enjoyed major success in UFC events which led to an increased demand for BJJ amongst consumers around the world. BJJ has been widely accepted in Western countries like the United States of America (USA) and the United Kingdom (UK), however, there has been a lag in the wider acceptance of BJJ in more conservative countries due to religion and culture which has been attributed to the close contact nature of the art. This has especially been the case for female participants in more conservative countries.

Pakistan appears to be an example of such countries where there has been a lag in the practice of BJJ by women. However, Professor Shehryar Qureshi the Head Coach of Mikado Jiu Jitsu has been one of the BJJ gym owners in Pakistan who have played a significant role in promoting the wider acceptance of BJJ amongst all groups.

## **2. Background of Professor Shehryar Qureshi**

Shehryar is originally from Lahore, Pakistan. He first encountered BJJ when he moved to Malaysia for his studies where he also gave birth to his entrepreneurial spirit through running a small sports equipment business remotely. Shehryar sold items like BJJ, Boxing and BJJ gear to customers around the world which allowed him to support himself financially while pursuing higher education in Malaysia. Shehryar first started practising BJJ in 2012 when he walked through the doors of Leverage BJJ in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Therefore, Malaysia was the place which allowed the initial development of Shehryar's BJJ and entrepreneurial skills. From the very start of his BJJ journey, Shehryar had a dream to one day run his academy. However, Shehryar immediately realised that the BJJ journey was a long and hard road where he understood the struggles and sacrifices that he had

to commit to realise his dream. In addition to training BJJ, Shehryar started to compete in Mixed Martial Arts and BJJ after a year into his journey. Shehryar started medalling in several tournaments around Malaysia and Pakistan.

Shehryar had a notable achievement at the Pakistan Grappling Challenge where he won silver in the absolute Gi division narrowly being pipped to winning the absolute division belt. An image of Shehryar on the podium at this event is illustrated in Fig. 3.



**Fig. 3.** Shehryar getting silver at the Pakistan Grappling Challenge 3

As shown in Fig. 3, Shehryar came very close to winning the national prize in BJJ competitions in Pakistan but he narrowly missed out. However, through hard work and determination, Shehryar further improved his competition game for BJJ to win most of his matches in different grappling events in Pakistan in 2018 where he demonstrated his versatility by succeeding in the gi (with Kimono) and no-gi (without Kimono) divisions where an image of his dominance at this event is illustrated in Fig. 4..



**Fig. 4.** Shehryar winning gold in the Pakistan Grappling Challenge 4

In addition to his success shown in Fig. 4, 2018 was also a year when Shehryar started coaching BJJ at Rogue Martial Arts where he immediately noticed that his coaching was met with really positive feedback. This further reinforced the resolve in Shehryar to one day establish his own BJJ school.

After the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, Shehryar moved to Malaysia where he continued to train and teach BJJ. Shehryar received his Blackbelt in BJJ from Professor Pedro Falbo at GFTeam (Grappling Fight Team) in Malaysia in March 2024 where the awarding of his Blackbelt is shown in Fig. 5.



**Fig. 5.** Shehryar received his black belt from Professor Pedro Falbo.

This significant achievement shown in Fig. 5 finally encouraged Shehryar to establish his school named Mikado Jiu Jitsu in Lahore, Pakistan in May 2024. The logo for Mikado Jiu Jitsu is illustrated in Fig. 6.



**Fig. 6.** The logo of Mikado Jiu Jitsu

### **3. The Emergence of Mikado Jiu Jitsu**

In the early stage of the business, Shehryar used word of mouth based on his previous BJJ coaching roles in Pakistan and Malaysia in addition to encouraging his friends and family to try BJJ at his school. To ensure lowered start-up costs, Shehryar started to run his classes from the premises of another fitness gym. This ensured that initial costs remained lower and it also ensured that Shehryar built up student numbers while taking a minimum risk, eg investing a significant amount of money in buying mats, installing showers, getting insurance and registering the business.

In the early stages of the business, Shehryar ensured that the presentation of the school was of a place which supported a family environment and encouraged people from different backgrounds to come and train. Martial arts gyms in Pakistan were traditionally known as places for lower to middle class males from a younger to middle age group to train which made such gyms to be an intimidating proposition for people from other groups to join and train at. Shehryar achieved a presentation of an inclusive and family environment at the gym through promotional videos and posts on social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram which also included student testimonials. This allowed Shehryar to promote the business at a minimal cost where there are no costs related to setting up business pages on Facebook and Instagram.

Shehryar also employed pricing strategies like trial classes for a week free of charge and yearly memberships at a reduced cost over monthly memberships. This ensured the attraction and retention of more students which is shown in Fig. 7.





**Fig. 7.** The Mikado Jiu-Jitsu team with Professor Shehryar Qureshi

As shown in Fig. 7, Shehryar enjoyed immediate success which may have been attributed to him employing strategies like reaching out to local universities to do taster sessions on campus to promote BJJ and his business. This strategy proved to be a success and led to university students signing up for classes at his gym. Shehryar's hard work led to him getting his full-time premises within 6 months of opening the gym where he was able to invest in his mats. This engagement with universities to support business growth can be classified as a form of industry-university collaboration which benefits both parties and is a point supported by various authors (Krupicka, 2024; Yasin et al., 2023). This is a significant achievement as normally it takes businesses offering similar services much more time to transition to their premises, eg minimum of 1-2 years.

Shehryar credits his success to consistency in key areas like professionalism, hygiene, safety for students, timings of classes, teaching techniques as well as the values and ethos of the school. Additionally, Shehryar credits the role of innovative approaches and technologies in enhancing Mikado Jiu Jitsu's visibility and growth which has also been highlighted by numerous authors to have a positive correlation with business growth and success (Al Jaghoub et al., 2024; Gilani et al., 2024a; Moussa et al., 2024). Shehryar has also noted that his variation in his teaching and leadership style based on his audience and client group (eg women, disabled adults, obese adults and children) has paid dividends in ensuring the business has preserved a reputation for a school which ensures an inclusive environment regardless of the client's background. Flexibility in leadership approach has also supported Shehryar in adapting his business strategy in and out of challenging periods for the business, eg when the school was incurring losses due to lower student numbers. The approach of situational leadership style ensuring business survival and growth has also been supported by various authors in the literature, especially, in the context of challenging periods like the COVID-19 pandemic era (Gilani et al., 2023a; Gilani et al., 2023b; Sulthan et al., 2022).

#### **4. The Future of Mikado Jiu Jitsu**

Shehryar is hoping to expand his business into different locations in Lahore with his senior students running these branches. In the long term, Shehryar is hoping to have a minimum of at least 1 BJJ school under the umbrella of Mikado Jiu Jitsu in every major city in Pakistan which he believes can be achieved within the next 5 years. Amongst these schools, he is looking to empower his female students to become women entrepreneurs while overseeing these additional BJJ schools which can be a shrewd tactic in further attracting the female group to BJJ training which has also been noted in previous publications related to women entrepreneurs (Gilani et al., 2024b). Finally, Shehryar is hoping to also expand his business into the UAE market. The rationale behind his long-term vision is Shehryar's respect for the UAE's current status as an innovative, cutting edge and inclusive nation as well as acknowledging the UAE's pivotal role in ensuring the emergence and survival of competition jiu jitsu through staging such events as the Abu Dhabi Combat Club (ADCC) championships as early as 1998 (BJJ Eastern Europe, 2024). However, Shehryar is under no illusion regarding the challenges of his business entering the UAE market.

#### **5. The landscape for BJJ Schools in the UAE**

The market for BJJ schools in the UAE is quite established and different from Pakistan. In Dubai, there are multiple gyms in each area which demonstrates a rather saturated market (UAE Jiu-Jitsu Federation, 2025). The market in Abu Dhabi is similar to Dubai, however, in other emirates there appears to be a dearth of BJJ schools which may be attributed to the average expendable income, culture and awareness amongst citizens in those emirates. Therefore, there may be an opportunity for Shehryar to expand his business into emirates outside of Dubai and Abu Dhabi. However, significant start-up costs will be required to register and start the business in the UAE in comparison to Pakistan due to the UAE being a more regulated country.

#### **6. Recommendations for Mikado Jiu-Jitsu**

The first recommendation by the authors for Mikado Jiu Jitsu is for Shehryar to carry on using innovative technology-based solutions for everyday operations to better engage with clients, better manage operations like payments and better promote the

business where the crucial role of innovative technologies and the related infrastructure for business prosperity is also a point supported by various studies (Aseer et al., 2024; Gernal et al., 2024; Gilani and Faccia, 2022). Strategic leadership plays a vital role in business sustainability and expansion. Research indicates that the mediating role of strategic leadership significantly influences digitalization and business planning, an approach that could be leveraged in Mikado Jiu Jitsu's potential expansion into the MENA region (Golshan Sorour et al., 2024). The concept of organizational health has been widely studied, particularly in terms of its impact on individual and business well-being. Mikado Jiu Jitsu's organizational values as well as impact on society appear to find alignment through the Organizational Health Behavior Index which acts as a metric for assessing the health of a business and its role in developing resilient organisations and wider communities (Jaafari et al., 2023; Khan et al., 2023). Mikado Jiu Jitsu has adopted innovative marketing methods and online as well as video-based testimonials involving students to better align with trends related to organisational operations and overall customer engagement (Iyer et al., 2024). According to Tantry and Ali (2020), business longevity and operational continuity at Mikado Jiu Jitsu may be attributed to consumer satisfaction. Shehryar's practice of establishing a gender-inclusive training environment at his gym aligns with findings from Gilani et al. (2025) who promote the role of gender diversity in strengthening business growth and sustainability (Gilani et al., 2025).

## 7. Conclusion

The success of Mikado Jiu-Jitsu demonstrates to the wider population how sports or activities like BJJ can empower individuals psychologically, especially, individuals from vulnerable backgrounds and enhance their psychological endurance while eliminating social barriers. The practice of BJJ by Pakistani women signifies a significant cultural paradigm shift within the very conservative state of Pakistan. Shehryar's unrelenting dedication to eliminating myths and promoting diversity on the BJJ mats appears to align with global sports-based empowerment movements. As mentioned earlier, students at Mikado Jiu Jitsu have experienced an improvement in their physical and mental well-being through weight loss and improved confidence. This achievement by Shehryar can be attributed to strategic leadership and innovation adoption within his business. This significant achievement in Pakistan should encourage Shehryar to expand the business into the MENA region with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) being a potential option for expansion due to the UAE's support of BJJ and established infrastructure. This paper how strategic leadership, cultural awareness and sensitivity, and innovation adoption can allow businesses to overcome significant cultural barriers which appear to be insurmountable.

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