



‘I need support to continue my Muay Thai career’: A qualitative study on social support amongst Muay Thai fighters in Thailand

Dusanee Suwankhong^{a,*}, Pranee Liamputtong^{b,†}, Chamnan Chinnasee^c, Witthaya Hemapandha^c

^a Public Health, Department of Public Health, Faculty of Health and Sports Science, Thaksin University, Phatthalung 93210, Thailand

^b College of Health Sciences, VinUniversity, Hanoi 100000, Vietnam

^c Sports and Exercise Science, Department of Sports Science, Faculty of Health and Sports Science, Thaksin University, Phatthalung 93210, Thailand

Article Info

Article history:

Received 1 February 2022

Revised 5 June 2022

Accepted 26 June 2022

Available online 21 June 2023

Keywords:

combat sport,
marginalized background,
Muay Thai fighter,
qualitative study,
social support

Abstract

Most Muay Thai fighters in Thailand are from marginalized backgrounds. To succeed in their profession, social support plays a crucial role. This paper discusses the role of social support among Muay Thai fighters, that assisted them to continue and thrive in their Muay Thai career. Semi-structured interviews and the photovoice method were conducted with 43 Muay Thai fighters in four regions of Thailand. Data were analyzed using the thematic analysis method. The findings showed five salient aspects of social support and their roles among the Muay Thai fighters including: (1) acceptance and belonging as social support; (2) appraisal and coping support function; (3) behavioral and cognitive guidance; (4) tangible and material assistance; and (5) modeling support. The sources of social support came from multiple means such as campsite owners, campsite trainers, friends, neighbors, family members, and Muay Thai followers. Most Muay Thai fighters received different aspects of social support from different sources. Social support helped to increase their ability to carry out their role and develop their future career. It is essential to understand social support for Muay Thai fighters through the lens of the insiders. Public health professionals, sports organizations and sports educators need to appreciate the importance of social support among Muay Thai fighters as such support acts as a buffering effect for the difficulties and suffering they may encounter at different stages of their lives as Muay Thai fighters.

© 2023 Kasetsart University.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: dusanee.s@tsu.ac.th (D. Suwankhong).

† Co-first authors.

E-mail address: pranee.l@vinuni.edu.vn (P. Liamputtong).

Introduction

Muay Thai is a unique Thai national sport that has been embedded in Thai culture for centuries (Kitiarsa, 2005; Vail, 1998). It is a tackling sport with high intensity and intermittent activities. To be successful, it demands high levels of tactical skills (Kitiarsa, 2005; Mohamad et al., 2017; Vail, 1998). The term Muay Thai or Muay Thai fighters is a commonly used terminology (Kitiarsa, 2005; Myers et al., 2013; Sienko-Awierianów et al., 2016; Vail, 1998). Muay Thai comprises a combination of combating systems that involves “two hands, two feet, two knees, two elbows, and the head as a weapon” (Muay Thai Conservation Center, Physical Education Division, 2021). The fighters perform powerful actions which are always demanding due to the unpredictable conditions of the sport (Crisafulli et al., 2009; Kitiarsa, 2005; Myers et al., 2013). Thus, they may experience changes and face traumatic situations in their lives. The fighters put in extensive efforts until they are able to succeed at the professional level and become famous fighters (Kitiarsa, 2005; Myers et al., 2013). In her research, Kitiarsa, (2005, p. 58) referred to Muay Thai fighters as *ma lai nuea* or hunting dog(s) who fiercely hunt for glory and wealth. As most of them come from poor socioeconomic backgrounds, Muay Thai has been a pathway to a successful life for many Muay Thai fighters (Kitiarsa, 2005).

Muay Thai profession aims to cultivate Thai masculinity (Jukping, 2020; Kitiarsa, 2005; Vail, 1998). Muay Thai fighters are trained to act as a guardian or a protector of Thai society. Thus, they must be brave and exhibit masculine characteristics as well as endurance, self-discipline, and observing social orders (Jukping, 2020; Kitiarsa, 2005). These images are recognized as a unique feature of Muay Thai fighters.

However, Muay Thai fighters also encounter many challenges during a competition because they need to compete and protect themselves from the attack of the opponents (Crisafulli et al., 2009; Kitiarsa, 2005). As the fighters combine many skills such as punching, kicking, kneeing, elbowing and clinching (Davies & Deckert, 2020; Gartland et al., 2001; Mohamad et al., 2017), injuries can occur, especially to those fighters who are not so experienced. Common injuries include soft tissues such as bruises and lacerations. Gartland et al. (2001) stated that a severe injury that often occurred with fighters during matches was the spontaneous rupture of the extensor pollicis longus tendon. Injuries could bring about adverse health problem for these fighters. Thus,

many individuals experience difficulties with their physical wellbeing when their career has ended. However, other injuries were also reported by beginner, amateur and professional participants. According to Katagami and Tsuchiya (2016), the fighters could be affected both physically and mentally when repeatedly performing for a long period of time.

Muay Thai fighters are also put pressure by various parties: campsite owners, campsite trainers, and Muay Thai supporters. These parties have high expectations of the fighter's best performance to win the competition (Kitiarsa, 2005). Thus, they tended to exert more physical strength and exhibit fierce fighting acts, which can lead to injuries (Buse & Wood, 2006; Lystad, 2015). Serious injuries that Muay Thai fighter could experience include soft tissue trauma, traumatic brain injury, muscle and bone injury and loss of consciousness (Buse & Wood, 2006). The injuries may also occur during training sessions (Bolach et al., 2015). Lystad (2015) reported that in a full-contact combat sport, injury is unavoidable. Because of injuries, the fighters are unable to continue the competition (Bledsoe et al. 2006).

Existing studies have examined the psychological, historical and social dimensions of Muay Thai fighters (Abgarov et al., 2012; Katagami & Tsuchiya, 2016; Kitiarsa, 2005; Rodriguez, 2012). However, we still know little about social support for these individuals. It is crucial that empirical research should be conducted in the field on Muay Thai fighters. For example, how do Muay Thai fighters perceive social support? How can they deal with difficulties without it? How do they deal with difficulties during their Muay Thai careers? What kinds of social support have they received? We focus on these issues in this paper.

Literature Review

Social Support and Its Role

Social support plays an important role in supporting individuals who encounter difficulties in life. It helps to shield individuals against adversity and helps to decrease stress in their live (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Katagami & Tsuchiya, 2016). Social support is embodied as one's experience of being, i.e. loved, concerned, valued, respected, and trusted by people who are part of one's life (Cohen & Wills, 1985). This is seen as a key factor in improving the health and quality of the lives of individuals. Social support for athletes is provided by many parties, depending on how we clarify and perceive its functions,

notably in its cognitive, emotional and behavioral aspects. It results in positive outcomes in terms of their performance and in disturbing their psychological health (Katagami & Tsuchiya, 2016). In addition, social support has been recognized as a coping mechanism, and helping to maintain and improve athletes' performance and their associated business (Abgarov et al., 2012; Rees & Freeman, 2010). Lack of good social support, according to Abgarov et al. (2012), can lead to fears, loss, anxiety, stress, low self-esteem and frustration. Individuals may also leave their career.

Theoretically, social support is social interaction that aims to bring positive outcomes to individuals (Abgarov et al., 2012; House et al., 1988; Rees & Freeman, 2010). Many terminologies are used when referring to social support and these include "recipient" and "provider". The recipient satisfaction of social support links to the person-environment fit theory. The individual satisfies the social support they provided if it fits person needs, personality, abilities and what is available supplied in the living environment (Abgarov et al., 2012; Ali et al., 2010). However, dissatisfaction can occur if it does not fit between the person and environmental characteristics. The person-environment fit model by Brown et al. (1988) has classified social support into five aspects: (1) acceptance and belonging (i.e. being loved, accepted, respected, belonging, and a shared communication network); (2) appraisal and coping support (e.g. gained emotional support, hope, coping assistance); (3) behavioral and cognitive guidance (i.e. provided modeled feedback and appropriate behavior and thought); (4) tangible and material assistance (i.e. support with money, goods, any services available in the social environment); and (5) modeling (e.g. how others feel and manage the situation). Social support is closely tied with family members, spouses, friends and even neighbors or significant others (Abgarov et al., 2012; Ali et al., 2010; Cohen & Wills, 1985).

The function of social support in the world of sport science has received attention, notably in helping recovery from injury (Bianco, 2001). Sport psychology has broadly examined the effect and impact of social support; some try to gain understanding of the experience of health problems among different groups of athletes. Such approaches are recognized as important factors in promoting both good psychological health and wellbeing (Abgarov et al., 2012; Katagami & Tsuchiya, 2016; Rodriguez, 2012; Yang et al., 2014). Sport psychology researchers tend to agree that the perception of existing support or perceived support are better predictors of factors leading to health and wellbeing outcomes,

especially in reducing burnout level (DeFreese & Smith, 2014; Katagami & Tsuchiya, 2016). Rees and Freeman (2010), and Katagami and Tsuchiya (2016) pointed out that in addition to perceived support, researchers in recent years have changed their focus on received support, which means the actual social support obtained as reported by the recipient. This focus enhances self-confidence and skill performance and deals better with the stress and difficulties encountered.

Methodology

The study on which this paper is based was conducted using a qualitative approach. Qualitative research offers researchers understanding about the lives and experiences of the research participants in great depth (Liamputtong, 2020). As we know little about social support and its role among Muay Thai fighters in Thailand, the qualitative inquiry is essential. Situated within a phenomenological framework, we used a multi-method qualitative research comprising of in-depth interviewing and photovoice methods in this study.

Participants and Data Collection

A number of Muay Thai campsites were contacted across Thailand (south, central, north and northeast regions) and explored through our personal networks and the snowball sampling method, where initial participants suggested other potential participants for inclusion in the study. As the campsite managers had a broad network of Muay Thai members, they connected us to individuals who could offer in-depth information about the issues we examined in the study. We then used the snowball sampling method to expand the number of research participants (Liamputtong, 2020). The number of key informants were determined by the saturation theory, where data collection ceased when little new data could be generated from the interviews (Liamputtong, 2020). Through the saturation theory, forty-three trained Muay Thai fighters at Muay Thai training campsites who met the criteria were purposively invited to provide in-depth knowledge relevant to the purpose of the study. The inclusion criteria were: (1) being a professional Muay Thai fighter; (2) having a registration with Thai professional boxing association; (3) participating regularly in fighting programs; and (4) being able to take part in the study. Their socioeconomic profiles are presented in [Table 1](#).

Table 1 Socioeconomic profiles of study participants

Items	Mean (Max, Min)	SD
Age (years)	21.86 (44, 12)	8.35
Monthly income (baht)	18,939 (80,000, 1,000)	21,090
Fighting duration (years)	9.58 (21, 2)	4.09
Start fighting age (years old)	9.76 (17, 6)	3.25
Start fighting weight (pounds)	71.18 (118, 40)	23.79
Current weight (pounds)	119.56 (147.40, 75)	15.68
Primary income (baht)	284.53 (500, 50)	113.00
Current payment for each fight (baht)	22,486.84 (110,000, 1,000)	26,993.11
Education		
Primary school	3	7
Secondary school	19	44.2
College	17	39.5
University	4	9.3
Religion		
Buddhist	41	95.3
Islam	2	4.7
Marital status		
Single	37	86
Married	6	14

This study obtained ethical approval from the University Human Ethics Committee, Thailand (No. E 068/2559). We contacted Muay Thai campsite owners to inform them about the study background and its objective and asked their permission to enter the campsites. The consent was obtained from the Muay Thai campsite owners and participants prior to the data collection.

To gain rich data from the study, we combined several methods for collecting the data: in-depth interviews and the photovoice method (Liamputtong, 2020). We ensured and maintained confidentiality throughout the process of our research and explained to the participants that they were not at risk concerning physical, emotional and social burdens. Participants were advised about the study background, objectives, process of data collection as well as related issues on the site. We asked them for consent for in-depth interviews and photovoice. They were allowed to withdraw from the study at any time if they wished.

Individuals who were eligible for the study were purposively invited to share their views relating to the study's aims. Appointments to interview the fighters were made based on their convenience, which was always on a weekend or public holiday. During the conversation, open-ended semi-structured strategies were adopted. This technique helps us to explore knowledge and experience, allowing us to gain insight into the data being collected (Suwankhong & Liamputtong, 2017). All interviews took place at the participants' home or training campsite. Although they are Thais, people of different regions use a

different dialect for communication. It was then decided to converse with Muay Thai fighters in each region using the official Thai dialect to better gain insight into their story better. As Spradley (1979) and Zapata and Shippee-Rice (1999) recommended, using appropriate language in communication is essential as it helps to establish rapport and promote participants to describe the story in their own words. The semi-structured interviews were carried out between one and two hours. Digital voice recorders were used to record the conversation and discussion.

The photovoice method was employed after in-depth interviews because it helped us to gain insights to the story from insiders' points of view. We asked them to photograph any images and situations that they were involved in, using their own mobile phones, that gave meaning to social support (Wang & Burris, 1997). The photos they captured were sent to us through Facebook messenger applications. All the images were downloaded and saved in the first author's laptop and given a password code to preserve confidentiality.

In theory, a focus group is organized to allow the participants to share and reflect on their photographs (Carreño et al., 2017). The participants in our study were asked to bring their images to discuss and share individually with us rather than with others in group discussions. We found that it was impossible to invite them to group meetings as they had different training schedules and fighting programs. Thus, the photovoice discussion was modified according to the needs of the participants.

Researchers should provide some compensation for participation to research participants because they might have to miss duties to devote their time to the project (Liamputtong, 2020). We therefore thought of some appropriate compensations for them, and eventually provided each campsite we visited with protein products for the Muay Thai fighters, such as eggs, a main food taken to build muscles and the strength of fighters.

Data Analysis

The thematic analysis method was adopted for data analysis. We initially performed open coding by reading each transcript line by line several times to become familiar with the data and find out key points that represented meanings and to develop codes and categories. Then we combined categories and subcategories into larger categories, which in the end allowed us to construct some themes. The process of connecting relevant themes into meaningful themes is complete when no new themes can be identified. These themes were used to explain the social support given to the participants in this study (Liamputtong, 2020).

The credibility of the data is reflected in the triangulation of the methods used in the study. We combined an in-depth interviewing method with the photovoice method. This allowed us to have both verbal and visual data for analysis, which increased the credibility of our findings. A strategy of checking by participants (member checking) was employed to ensure the credibility of the collected data (Liamputtong, 2020). We gave our first drafts to participants to read through to see if our interpretations reflected their social support experiences. Their feedback was useful because they were able to point out missing points that we did not see, and direct us to alternative sources to bridge any data gaps.

Results and Discussion

Several salient themes regarding social support that are important for Muay Thai fighters were constructed from the data. These are discussed below.

Acceptance and Belonging as Social Support

The lives of Muay Thai fighters relied extensively on the campsite setting. They resided inside the campsite so that they were always with their peers and trainers. This provided them the advantages of a learning environment which helped them absorb Muay Thai principle and to practise related skills. Every respondent remarked that they felt at home in the

campsite because they had friends who could share their happiness and suffering. Some stated that the campsite was like a big family because there were many people from different places living together over the years. Such an environment increased trust and bonding, which provided a great source of social support. If one member faced difficulties, other campsite members could provide help and support.

As the profession required its practitioners to live in the same campsite for a long time, their relationship was one of friendship, kinship and belonging to a community. As such, they were able to develop bonds quickly based on trust. As Kitiarsa (2005) articulated, each fighter left his home and family at a very young age and stayed in the training campsite. The atmosphere of living in the campsite helped them to cultivate good relationships with their colleagues. They supported and helped their peers by sharing daily chores and this increased social bonds among them.

According to one participant, Krit, on the fighting day, families and friends also come to provide emotional support as illustrated in this photo (see Figure 1).



Figure 1 Sense of belonging to a Muay Thai community

According to the principle of Muay Thai ways of training, its member must live in the campsite to gain the best practice for the Muay Thai profession. Individuals naturally increase bonds and trust, which enable them to be one of the family members of a campsite. This environment encourages them to commit to achieving their mission. The way of living in the campsite is based on family orientation, and this can create a great source of social support because individuals feel at home at the campsite. The longer they live in the campsite, the stronger the bond increases, which influences them to perform their role at best. As Katagami and Tsuchiya (2016) suggested, individuals can gain support from peers, and this brings positive effects and the wellbeing of athletes. San said:

“[I] love everyone in the campsite like family members. Everyone respects each other and shares things, we treat each other as our family...[we] are not alone here...I am part of campsite members and the Muay Thai profession. As we feel that we have teamwork and are in the same profession, so it encourages me to do my best” (May 2019).

Furthermore, the photo below (Figure 2) shows how much bonding they achieved and it accounted for great social support among themselves as a result of a long period of living together in the campsite. The longer they stayed together, the stronger the ties they created. In addition, such an atmosphere helped them focus on their professional career. Photovoice showed that social support as a source, for instance, could enable Muay Thai fighters to create support to form a bridge to connect with colleagues.



Figure 2 Keeping them to stay in Muay Thai profession

Muay Thai supporters is another group providing acceptance and support to Muay Thai fighters. They are admired by their supporters because they can exhibit a high level of martial arts and thereby gained a good reputation in the Muay Thai world. The fighters saw this support as an encouraging factor and kept them developing better fighting skills to make Muay Thai the martial art of the country and to become well known internationally. All pointed out that they felt that they belonged to a profession. Many times, they felt like giving up the profession because they were tired of their routine. Positive words from their supporters around the stadium were an encouraging factor that boosted the energy of Muay Thai fighters. The support from their supporters reminded Muay Thai fighters that they could not disappoint them.

Although their parents were allowed to visit the campsites, some asked permission from campsite owners to visit home when they wanted a break from training or had finished the fighting programs. By visiting home,

they could spend time with their family and gain more encouragement. San remarked that:

“My mom always tells me that if I love being a Muay Thai fighter, I have to work hard...don’t be lazy. I have to stick to the rules. If I am lazy...just leave the profession. Her words gave me the sense of encouragement.” (June 2019)

Many told us that, apart from family members, people in their hometown also appreciated the recognition of their Muay Thai talent. The support they received gave them *kam lung jai* (emotional encouragement). This prompted them to feel they were good Muay Thai fighters, and they would make every effort to make great progress in their profession. This would allow them to meet their supporters’ expectation of their role. Sok said:

“*Kum lung jai* is very important for us...[I] phone home often...talk to mom and dad. They always admire me...I perceived that many people around our area respect and support me staying in this career” (June 2019).

The snapshot from San (Figure 3) showed the support he always received from his parents, and this helped him to get over the difficulties he was encountering.



Figure 3 The support from parents on fighting day

The participants obtain social support from various sources. Key sources of support like campsite colleges are a predominant factor encouraging them to continue their task and career. Rodriguez (2012) found that social support is a significant determinant in helping to decrease stress as well as burden among athletes, and this connected with their career thoughts. Once one has positive thoughts, one can better plan for a future career. This is in line with Berg and Warner (2019) who claimed that this support has an impact on the feelings of athletes. The sense of encouragement enhances them to commit to their role.

Cohen and Wills (1985); Rees and Freeman (2010) also posited that although life events cause stress, the available social support is recognized as a buffering factor reducing the negative effects of stresses in life.

Appraisal and Coping Support Function

Muay Thai fighters participating in our study had high expectations from many parties and this increased their stress and anxiety. They thus had to train even harder to meet the expectation of these parties. If they followed the training programs and always took it as their routine activity, they had a high chance of becoming a champion. We also found that the different ages and experiences of fighters offered good support as the senior and more experienced ones shared their thoughts and experiences with novice fighters. This helped to ease the stress and difficulties. Kitiarsa (2005) supported this reality that Muay Thai trainees had to go through tough training pathways until they could achieve the champion level. The tough and continuous training sessions became part of their daily lives. This typical routine training built them to be strong, possessing patience and being a calm person, which could help them to deal with different situations they might encounter. Jukping (2020) articulated that the principle of Muay Thai martial art authentically aims to cultivate not only the strengthening of body but also the spirit of individual practitioners. Kong, a 22 year old fighter, stated:

“When close to the fighting match, I trained even harder as training can make my body strong enough, so I can win the match and won’t disappoint followers. Campsite trainers and senior fighters gave me good advice and taught me the tricks...it increases my confidence and reduces worry” (May 2019).

The figure below from Kong (Figure 4) represents a Muay Thai fighter’s daily routine:



Figure 4 Hard training as daily life

“We all have tentative schedules planned by the Muay Thai trainer of our campsite. Each campsite designs programs similarly because it builds up from the same principle. These programs were integrated into their daily life and became routine practice. I never forget what I have to do each day as a good Muay Thai fighter... it gave me a sense of emotional support...” (June 2019).

The nature of Muay Thai training approach adheres to a continuous schedule program, and all fighters are committed to follow the task and assigned it as their daily routine. Most Muay Thai fighters in our study put it as their main duty each day. Although the training program requires a lot of energy and time, they are happy to continue the responsibility. Despite the training program being assigned to be the responsibility of an individual fighter, colleagues and friends in the campsite as well as family members are recognized as key sources of support that encourages them maintaining and improving standard performances. Aitchison et al. (2021) articulated that social support plays an important part for athletes in all contexts, and it is a key factor promoting athletes to achieve their goal.

Behavioral and Cognitive Guidance

Each campsite created various environments to shape professional Muay Thai fighters by setting up rules and regulations, posting pictures of successful fighters around the campsite, and acknowledging Muay Thai champions. These examples were applied to shape the personality and ethics of Muay Thai fighters and were seen positively by them. The fighters always followed these rules and practices. This positive environment helped guide positive behavior and related cognitive aspects among Muay Thai fighters. This is in accordance with Kitiarsa (2005), who expressed that Muay Thai fighters are likely under the supervision and observation of many parties: campsite manager and trainer, for instance.

Figure 5 shows how proud they were of themselves because they always adhered to the rules and regulations of the campsite. They might be able to reach the high performance level and be recognized across regions. We also found that all Muay Thai fighters in this study saw themselves as public persons. Thus, they had to behave well and exhibit appropriate manners at all times. Their supporters would admire them.



Figure 5 An appropriate behavior for a Muay Thai fighter

The orientation of the Muay Thai profession creates strong rules and regulations for the practitioners aiming to promote achieved performance of professionals. The rigid rules and regulations naturally form appropriate behaviors and professional manners of an individual fighter. As a result, Muay Thai fighters have unique attributes, which people can recognize and differentiate from other athlete's characteristics. Ali et al. (2010) agreed that traditional martial arts offer a person to be more aware of their nature as well as to actively pursue character development through the constant evaluation of actions and thoughts. Subsequently, this leads to better adaptation of thoughts and actions. According to Cohen and Wills (1985), the valuable impact of social support might be manifested since their communal networks offer individuals with positive experiences and social rewarded roles within their society.

From our conversation with Muay Thai fighters, they stressed that campsite trainers had enormous influences on their performance and character. They played a key role in designing training programs suited to the character of individual fighters. Apart from this, they provided close advice and demonstrated techniques to promote professional Muay Thai fighters. Many participants agreed that if they had not received such guidance, being a successful Muay Thai fighter would not have been possible. The guidance received from trainers support them to become famous fighters in Thailand.

Tangible and Material Assistance

Many Muay Thai fighters considered that gaining proper education was important for Muay Thai lives. A lot of them

paid attention to pursuing a degree. Many were full-time students in formal education systems. Some were studying in informal institutions. They expected to have degrees and to apply for jobs they desired after retirement from the Muay Thai profession. They all realized that they could only carry out this career up to thirty at the maximum. The campsite owners supported everyone in continuing study as it would add to their qualification, and they could have careers afterwards. Many campsite owners agreed to design training schedules to fit study programs. These fighters could thus perform both duties well. Sing, a fighter from the central region, said: "...we can do fighting till we are at about 30...get a degree...then I would stop and find a proper job to secure my future...".

Many campsites had built Muay Thai networks with Muay Thai clubs overseas. The network provided Muay Thai fighter with opportunities to go overseas to gain more experiences and skills. This also built up each individual fighter's profile, which helped them to become higher level champions. As a result, they could become better known to a broader society. Such a profile could increase their future career and income.

We found that all fighters were provided with a supplemented diet before each fight as a campsite service. Campsite trainers gave them additional food, including eggs and supplement foods such as the Brand products, which are popular in Thailand. The provision of such products had become a common tradition in Muay Thai society. The products had additional protein as nutrients, which was essential for their health and strength. The fighters would gain more body strength and be fit enough for each fight. They thus gained more confidence so that they could have a better chance of becoming champions compared with those fighters who did not boost themselves with these kinds of products. The fighters were given these products once or twice a week before the match competition. Muay Thai fighters from all regions portrayed this reward as tangible and material assistance provided by campsite owners and relevant parties. The consequence of this support can promote a robust fighter who would have high chance of being a winner.

Modeling Support

Most participants suggested that the principle and practice of Muay Thai profession include strict regulation and rules for its community members. Individuals strictly followed these in their daily lives, and this naturally shaped them to become a person who respects rules and regulations. All behaved in a proper manner and were polite to everyone. They had positive thoughts on life.

Krit stated: “Muay Thai supports me to stay away from drugs... I don’t take alcohol... never been to a bar or pub.”

We found that the participants were not involved in drinking alcohol, smoking or taking drugs. They considered these as health risk factors, and such reduced the capacity for their performance and competition. These are the rigid rules that all fighters had to adhere to. If they broke the rules, they could be dismissed from the Muay Thai fighter profession. As their skills would decrease due to drugs and alcohol, their Muay Thai fighter careers would be over. They realized that if they wanted to be a Muay Thai fighter, they had to behave positively to promote Muay Thai behavior.

All the fighters tried to keep their bodies as fit as they could to allow them to continue their careers as long as they could. Sok, a 24 year old Muay Thai fighter, shared his views: “...our body is always involved in tough training... fighting... for many years... we often get injuries, it progressively deteriorates... impairs organs.” But several fighters felt that they would continue their profession until their bodies could no longer tolerate it, although they were over 30 years old. This was because they admired this profession. Si said:

“It depends on the individual’s condition... depending on strength and health. Some still do not stop although 30... some would stop around 20 years old... it depends really.” (December 2018)

Our findings revealed that social support held a vital role in enhancing the careers and positive outcomes of the lives of Muay Thai fighters. Individuals may receive support from different sources and for different aspects, in accordance with one’s circumstances and environment. Our study has reinforced the significant role of social support in helping these fighters to continue and make progress in their careers. According to the principle and practice of the Muay Thai profession, it has integrated the concept and practice of social support in its strategy. For example, Muay Thai fighters are encouraged to live in the campsites with colleagues. Campsite owners set up a suitable environment in and around the camp, provide the necessities for living, and set up facilities for training programs. Parents or family members can visit the campsite if they wish. For many Muay Thai fighters from poor backgrounds, through being Muay Thai fighters, they are able to improve their social and economic status, and this ultimately increases their lives and wellbeing.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Social support enhances the careers and positive outcomes of the lives of many Muay Thai fighters.

Individuals may receive support from different sources and for different aspects, in accord with one’s circumstances and environment. This paper has confirmed the essence of social support in supporting Muay Thai fighters to continue and make progress in their careers. According to the principle and practice of the Muay Thai profession, it has integrated the concept of social support in its strategy. For example, Muay Thai fighters are encouraged to live in the campsites with colleagues. Campsite owners set up a suitable environment in and around the camp, provide the necessities for living, and set up facilities for training programs. Parents or family members can visit the campsite regularly. For many Muay Thai fighters from poor backgrounds, through being Muay Thai fighters, they are able to improve their social and economic status, and this ultimately increases their quality of life.

However, they face many difficulties throughout their careers. Social support demonstrated its role in diminishing these difficulties. The sources of social support they obtained are varied: families, campsite owners, campsite members, trainers and people in their communities. The different sources provide different kinds of support to these individuals.

There is limited knowledge about social support among Muay Thai fighters in Thailand. We contend that the findings of this study could help sports organizations to understand the lives of Muay Thai fighters and provide appropriate support related to their daily lives, needs and career. This could help them perform well in the profession and pass their knowledge and skills on to younger generations. This way, Muay Thai will continue to exist in society.

Methodologically, the photovoice technique is an innovative mean that allowed us to increase our in-depth understanding of the lives of Muay Thai fighters (Liamputtong, 2020). The method permits the participants to be able to express their ideas about their lives and experiences that could not be achieved via words alone. We contend that the photovoice method is a research method that public health and sports science researchers should adopt in their research. It would support them to better appreciate the lived experiences of the individuals they work with. We recommend more use of this method in public health and sports science in the future.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgments

We thank all Muay Thai fighters who opened their world and shared their experiences with us. Our deep thanks go to Muay Thai campsite owners for support and making this study possible. Also, we would like to thank the Research Development Institute, Thaksin University, Thailand for the research grant.

References

- Abgarov, A., Jeffery-Tosoni, S., Baker, J., & Fraser-Thomas, J. (2012). Understanding social support throughout the injury process among interuniversity swimmers. *Journal of Intercollegiate Sport*, 5(2), 213–229. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jis.5.2.213>
- Aitchison, B., Rushton, A. B., Martin, P., Soundy, A., & Heneghan, N. R., (2021). The podium illusion: A phenomenological study of the influence of social support on well-being and performance in elite para swimmers. *BMC Sports Science Medicine and Rehabilitation*, 13, 42. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13102-021-00269-1>
- Ali, T., Emrah, A., Fahri, A., Necmettin, P., & Gülcan, T. (2010). Martial artists versus team sportsmen: Aggressiveness and received social support. *Psychology*, 10(2), 202–207. <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Martial-artists-versus-team-sportsmen>
- Berg, B., & Warner, S. (2019). Advancing college athlete development via social support. *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics*, 12, 87–113. http://csri-jiia.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/RA_2019_05.pdf
- Bianco, T. (2001). Social support and recovery from sport injury: Elite skiers share their experiences. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 72(4), 376–388. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02701367.2001.10608974>
- Bledsoe, G. H., Hsu, E. B., Grabowski, J. G., Brill, J. D., & Li, G. (2006). Incidence of injury in professional mixed martial arts competitions. *Journal of Sports Science and Medicine*, 5(CSS1), 136–142. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3863915/>
- Bolach, B., Witkowski, K., Zerzut, M., & Bolach, E. (2015). Injuries and overloads in Thaiboxing (Muay Thai). *Archives of Budo Science of Martial Arts*, 11, 339–349. <https://archbudo.com/view/abstract/id/10831>
- Brown, S. D., Alpert, D., Lent, R. W., Hunt, G., & Brady, T. (1988). Perceived social support among college students: Factor structure of the social support inventory. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 35(4), 472–478. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.35.4.472>
- Buse, G., & Wood, R. M. (2006). Safety profile of amateur kickboxing among military and civilian competitors. *Military Medicine*, 171(5), 443–447. <https://doi.org/10.7205/milmed.171.5.443>
- Carreño, V., Franco, M., Gullón, P., & Carreño, V. (2017). Studying city life, improving population health. *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 46(1), 14–21. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ije/dyv207>
- Cohen, S., & Wills, T. A. (1985). Stress, social support, and the buffering hypothesis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 98(2), 310–357. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.98.2.310>
- Crisafulli, A., Vitelli, S., Cappai, I., Milia, R., Tocco, F., Melis, F., & Concu, A. (2009). Physiological responses and energy cost during a simulation of a Muay Thai boxing match. *Applied Physiology, Nutrition, and Metabolism*, 34(2), 143–150. <https://doi.org/10.1139/h09-002>
- Davies, S. G., & Deckert, A. (2020). Muay Thai: Women, fighting, femininity. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 55(3), 327–343. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690218801300>
- DeFreese, J. D., & Smith, A. L. (2014). Athlete social support, negative social interactions and psychological health across a competitive sport season. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 36(6), 619–630. <https://doi.org/10.1123/jsep.2014-0040>
- Gartland, S., Malik, M. H., & Lovell, M. E. (2001). Injury and injury rates in Muay Thai kick boxing. *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, 35(5), 308–313. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bjism.35.5.308>
- House, J. S., Umberson, D., & Landis, K. R. (1988). Structures and processes of social support. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 14(1), 293–318. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.so.14.080188.001453>
- Jukping, S. (2020). Re-inventing the martial ‘hero’ and the weak ‘beauty queen’ through the sporting identity: A tale of two competing gendered bodies, Muay Thai and the stability of the Thai nation-state. *Sport in History*, 40(3), 296–312. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17460263.2020.1775693>
- Katagami, E., & Tsuchiya, H. (2016). Effects of social support on athletes’ psychological well-being: The correlations among received support, perceived support, and personality. *Psychology*, 7, 1741–1752. <https://doi.org/10.4236/psych.2016.713163>
- Kitiarsa, P. (2005). ‘Lives of hunting dogs’: “Muai Thai” and the politics of Thai masculinities. *South East Asia Research*, 13(1), 57–90. <https://doi.org/10.5367/0000000053693572>
- Liamputtong, P. (2020). *Qualitative research methods* (5th ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Lystad, R. P. (2015). Injuries to professional and amateur kickboxing contestants: A 15-year retrospective cohort study. *Orthopaedic Journal of Sports Medicine*, 3(11), 1–4 <https://doi.org/10.1177/2325967115612416>
- Mohamad, N. I., Chinnasee, C., Hemapandha, W., Vongjaturapat, N., Makaje, N., Ratanarojanakool, P., & Pimjan, L. (2017). Sports science-based research on the sport of muay thai: A review of the literature. *Walailak Journal of Science and Technology*, 14(8), 615–625. <https://www.scopus.com/record/display.uri?eid=2-s2.0-85202503708&origin>
- Muay Thai Conservation Center, Physical Education Division. (2021). *Muay Thai art*. <https://www.dpe.go.th/manual-files-392891791804> [in Thai]
- Myers, T., Balmer, N., Nevill, A., & Al-Nakeeb, Y. (2013). Techniques used by elite Thai and UK muay thai fighters: An analysis and simulation. *Advances in Physical Education*, 3, 175–186. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ape.2013.34029>
- Rees, T., & Freeman, P. (2010). Social support and performance in a golf-putting experiment. *Sport Psychologist*, 24, 333–348. <https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.24.3.333>
- Rodriguez, S. (2012). Social support and career thoughts in college athletes and non-athletes. *The Professional Counselor*, 2, 12–21. <https://doi.org/10.15241/srr.2.1.12>
- Sieńko-Awierianów, E., Orłowski, L., & Chudecka, M. (2016). Injuries in Thai boxing. *Central European Journal of Sport Sciences and Medicine*, 15, 37–45. <https://doi.org/10.18276/cej.2016.3-04>
- Spradley, J. P. (1979). *The ethnographic interview*. Rinehart and Winston.
- Suwankhong, D., & Liamputtong, P. (2017). ‘I was told not to do it but...’: Infant feeding practices amongst HIV-positive women in southern Thailand. *Midwifery*, 48, 69–74. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.midw.2017.03.007>
- Vail, P. T. (1998). Modern “Muai Thai” mythology. *An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 12(2), 75–95. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40860679>
- Wang, C., & Burris, M. A. (1997). Photovoice: Concept, methodology, and use for participatory needs assessment. *Health Education & Behavior*, 24(3), 369–387. <https://doi.org/10.1177/109019819702400309>
- Yang, J., Schaefer, J. T., Zhang, N., Covassin, T., Ding, K., & Heiden, E. (2014). Social support from the athletic trainer and symptoms of depression and anxiety at return to play. *Journal of Athletic Training*, 49(6), 773–779. <https://doi.org/10.4085/1062-6050-49.3.65>
- Zapata, J., & Shippee-Rice, R. (1999). The use of folk healing and healers by six Latinos living in New England: A preliminary study. *Journal of Transcultural Nursing*, 10(2), 136–142. <https://doi.org/10.1177/104365969901000207>