



The Lived Experience of *Nak Muay Thai*

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Abstract

Muay Thai fighting has been embedded in traditional Thai sport for generations. However, little is known about the lives of these *nak muay Thai* (*muay Thai* fighters). This chapter discusses the study with *nak muay Thai* using qualitative methods to gain a deep understanding about the lives of these individuals living in different regions of Thailand. The photovoice method was conducted with 43 trained *nak muay* in combination with an in-depth interviewing method.

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Most entered the world of *nak muay Thai* when they were very young, for some, when they were about seven years of age. Their lifestyles are noticeably different from other people of the same age. They spend most of their time practicing this martial art in a campsite. There, they have to rigidly follow strict rules, regulations, and training programs. Personal interest and poverty are prominent reasons of becoming a *muay Thai* fighter. Being a *muay Thai* fighter can provide them with proper career and regular income which greatly increase their social inclusion in Thai society and quality of life. They become well-known personalities and are recognized by people in Thai society. Society expects and acknowledges them as good role models for the youth in Thai society. Due to their social participation, their social status also increases.

Keywords

Muay Thai · Lived experience · *Muay Thai* fighter · Social inclusion · Photovoice method · Thailand

1 Introduction

Muay Thai is internationally known as Thai boxing. Its principles and practice originate from countries in Asia: Thailand, Burma, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Malaysia. In Thailand, in particular, it was used because it featured fighting skills relevant on battle fields during times of war. *Muay Thai* refers to the art of eight limbs because it always uses a mixture of techniques while fighting, such as using knees, elbows, and shin bones. Because of these qualities, it is not only used as a weapon for protecting the country, but also becomes a national art and part of the heritage of Thai wisdom (Bolach et al. 2015; Department of Physical Education 2016). A person who practices *muay Thai* technique and follows this practice as a career is referred to as *nak muay Thai* (*muay Thai* fighter).

Muay Thai is classified as a national combat sport in Thailand and involves standup striking along with many clinching practices (Bolach et al. 2015; Mohamad et al. 2017). It is also recognized as a traditional combat sport and has been in existence for more than a hundred years (Gartland et al. 2001). *Muay Thai* is seen as the martial art of Thailand and has rapidly increased in popularity worldwide. There are many individuals participating in traditional *muay Thai* activities. *Muay Thai* can do both – enhance physical fitness and bring mental health benefits to individuals because it allows people to use different parts of the body when practicing it (Gartland et al. 2001; Zazryn et al. 2003).

Muay Thai gained wide international recognition in the twentieth century when its fighters defeated notable fighters of other martial arts. In Thailand, this kind of martial art seems increasingly popular among low-economic status people. Many can make a career out of *muay Thai* practice which increases their life chance and quality of life. Not only does *muay Thai* support better lives of individuals, but such martial arts can also enhance the social status and lived experiences of many poor

people in the country. Importantly, *muay Thai* also plays a significant role in promoting the reputation of the nation (Cappai et al. 2012; Department of Physical Education 2016).

Muay Thai makes use of many parts of the body and combines various postures to emphasize discipline, respect, and spirituality. Its fighting combines such techniques as punching, kicking, kneeing, and elbowing in the fighting style (Gartland et al. 2001; Zazryn et al. 2003; Mohamad et al. 2017). However, the fighter can get injured while performing (Gartland et al. 2001), and even during training sessions (Zazryn et al. 2003; Strotmeyer et al. 2016; Jensen et al. 2017). While injuries occur mostly to those who have less experience and skill, common injuries include skeletal muscle damage, soft tissue trauma, hematomas, and lacerations. Injuries tend to occur around the head, face, and neck (Gartland et al. 2001). These can cause long-term health conditions. As a result, many encounter a difficult life after their career as *nak muay Thai* has ended (Loug-Ui and Moungee 2013).

Most *muay Thai* fighters usually reside at a training campsite which is considered a boarding school. For many, the campsite is seen as their home. This design is intended to enable the individual *muay Thai* fighter to practice and improve their fighting skills. They are able to train better because they spend most of their time in the campsite environment, and they can be better focused on their duties and responsibilities. In the context of this physical environment, the fighters have social networks and friends from many places across the country's regions. The majority of campsite members come from a low-socioeconomic background. They can share happiness and suffering as members of this "family." Furthermore, campsite owners provide the necessities for living which mainly include meals and accommodation during their stay. To enhance *muay Thai* skills, all campsites retain *muay Thai* trainers to organize training programs and lessons for these fighters. According to Strotmeyer and Lystad (2017), if one strictly follows a training program, he will have a high chance of succeeding and being spared from injury. It must also be said that each campsite is different in terms of their social and cultural contexts and these have different dynamics for the practices and lifestyles of individual fighters.

In this chapter, through the use of photovoice and individual interviews, a number of significant issues are discussed that can promote the lives of *muay Thai* fighters to ensure that this Thai martial art will continue to be a part of Thai national pride.

2 History of *Muay Thai* Fighting

Muay Thai is both an art and science and is popularly known as the "Science" or "Art" of eight limbs. It carries at its heart old traditions and an ancient fighting spirit. Since the initial development of *muay Thai*, it has changed in many ways and is now considered as a modern sport, rather than a battlefield skill (Henry 2013). Historically, *muay Thai* has been with Thai people since ancient times starting from the period of Sukhothai, Ayutthaya, and Thonburi to Rattanakosin and is still developing today. All Thai people in the past had to protect the land through using various kinds of weapons such as swords, spears, halberds, and maces. Apart from this equipment,

the Thais also used parts of their body as an arms to fight in a war, using as punches, elbows, knees, and feet. All these are now referred to as the “*muay Thai* martial art” (Saengsawang et al. 2015).

Evidence from Thai history, prior to the Buddhist era to the Rattanakosin period, shows that Thailand had battled with neighboring countries so that the autonomy of the land could be maintained. It was essential that Thai citizens have to have skills in martial arts; even the king of the land had to earn this fighting ability in order to win the battles. However, during the Ayutthaya period, Thailand lost its sovereignty to Burma (Myanmar at present time). Many Thai citizens became prisoners of Burma. King Ang-Wa of Burma organized a boxing tournament and told the Thais to send their representatives to battle with Burmese ones. Nai Khanomtom was sent to fight against the Burmese. He defeated all the Burmese *muay* fighters. As a result, Nai Khanomtom was coined as the predecessor of *muay Thai* (Saengsawang et al. 2015; Department of Physical Education 2016).

The objective of practicing *muay Thai* was to use it as a weapon to fight enemies (Matcharat 1986). Many Thai people in the past liked to practice *muay Thai* because they wanted to increase their social status. *Muay Thai* is widespread both in the past and present because it is an ancient art and cultivated as a martial art, a national art, and a traditional game which has a long history. There are several types of *muay Thai boran* (ancient *muay Thai*) which are each different in techniques and styles, but they all came from the same root. These include *muay Korat*, *muay Chai Ya*, *muay Uttaradit*, *muay Lopburi*, *muay Phranakhon*, and *muay Sakhon Nakhon* (Wattthanawet 1983). The way to retain ancient *muay Thai* as a part of Thai society is to study the meanings of *muay Thai* among *muay Thai* fighters, and to appreciate their lived experiences as well as the ways that society can enhance their well-being. These steps could ensure that *muay Thai* will survive and progress in Thailand in the future.

As *muay Thai* is a combat sport using many parts of the body such as the feet, ankle, knees, toe, and heel, the fighters have a high chance of being injured (Vaseenon et al. 2015). *Muay Thai* fighters who participated in the study faced injury at both upper and lower extremities. Individual fighters who have been practicing in the profession for a long period of time have lower risks of getting serious injuries because they have gained much experience. Those who have limited experience have a higher chance of getting injured because they may not have a good technique or experience when fighting. They are at higher risk of harm in the competitions. However, the benefits and values of traditional *muay Thai* indicate that it is important to develop physical, emotional, social, and mental skills as well as positive attitudes toward *muay Thai*.

3 Being a *Muay Thai* Fighter

Muay Thai fighting is recognized as a national martial arts and has been embedded in Thai society for decades. Individual fighters take different pathways into this profession. The *muay Thai* profession, however, provides many

advantages to individual fighters. It can increase their social status and improve their quality of life. *Muay Thai* is followed among younger generations. Other people pay much more attention to the practice of *muay Thai* for different purposes.

Fighters have to put in much effort in order to achieve certain professional levels. This is partly because this typical combat sport features high-intensity activities intermittently which demand multifaceted skills and strategic excellence for their attainment. Although the fighters perform with powerful actions, the performance is always challenging as it is based on unpredictable contexts (Crisafulli et al. 2009; Silva et al. 2011). The fighters have to face dynamics stages during a match because they try to fight and defend themselves from attacks by their opponent (Crisafulli et al. 2009). The study conducted by Cappai et al. (2012), undertaken to gain an understanding of the physiological capacities of *muay Thai* performers, revealed that fighters physically require both aerobic and anaerobic energy systems. Throughout a match, they perform over three phases: simulation, active, and recovery phases. Each phase requires the use of different levels of aerobic and anaerobic energy.

As suggested earlier, *muay Thai* fighters can experience injuries. Although the injuries can occur when playing sports, there are few studies on this issue among kickboxers (Zazryn et al. 2003). Zazryn et al. (2003) reported that kickboxers can get injuries either during training or in competitions. The kinds of injuries commonly found were tendon ruptures and skeletal muscle damage. Their study of Victorian kickboxers, in 2003, reported that injuries mostly occurred around the head/face/neck (51.6%). The second region most often injured were the lower extremities (39.8%). The types of injuries commonly reported were bruising and blistering. Skin laceration was a common type of injury among Victorian kickboxers.

Muay Thai fighters are, unavoidably, vulnerable to getting injured. Injury can occur both in the stages of training and in competitions, even though they wear protective equipment: shin guards, groin protectors, trunk pads, boxing gloves, elbow pads, mouthguards, and protective headgear. The most common injuries reported among *muay Thai* boxers include soft tissue trauma, hematomas, and lacerations whereas there were lower risks to the lower extremities. Several parts were found to have a high risk of injury: the head, face, and neck. The younger ones and those with less experience tend to face higher risks (Gartland et al. 2001). A serious injury that occurs with *muay Thai* boxers during competitions was spontaneous rupture of the pollicis longus tendon (Gartland et al. 2001; Bolach et al. 2015). Gartland et al. (2001) revealed in their study that injuries were reported among beginners, amateurs, and professionals. The most injuries that occurred among these groups were around soft tissues, with symptoms such as contusions and lacerations. The second common injuries among beginner and amateur groups were sprains and strains, whereas the second most common injuries among professional boxers were fractures. A study by Bolach et al. (2015) found that the lower extremities and head were most often affected in fights. Such injuries could lead to health problems in later life.

4 What Is Photovoice Method?

There has been little in-depth research that examined the lived experience of *muay Thai* fighters across Thailand (Mohamad et al. 2017). Most *muay Thai* fighters can be considered as a vulnerable group. They have their own world, as mentioned above, and people outside may not be able to reach and understand their lived experiences through their own stories. This research could be beneficial for the *muay Thai* fighters because existing studies tended to focus on their practical skills (Crisafulli et al. 2009; Turner 2009). A research methodology that could enhance social inclusion among the research participants is needed. The use of the photovoice method is one such way that strives for more social inclusion in research.

Photovoice has been used in many research areas including in health and social sciences. Its principle emphasizes three aims: (1) encourage participants to achieve critical consciousness; (2) provide more space for participants to share their lived stories by using their own words; and (3) provide policymakers with the findings that can be used to make social change (Latz et al. 2016). Photography provides many benefits to public health researchers as it allows them to understand issues from the perspective of those experiencing health challenges. This is because it enables the individuals to identify, share, and offer narratives of their lived experiences through photographs (Teti et al. 2017). To gain insight into the participants' world, "photovoice participants are given cameras and asked to document various aspects of their lived experiences through photography" (Latz et al. 2016, p. 126). The participants are often trained to capture the images and observe their own experiences to gain rich detail about their lives (Teti et al. 2017).

There are four components in the procedures used for photovoice techniques: (1) tutorials are used to introduce the research project and camera; (2) the use of a group photo sharing session; (3) reflection on individual photos; and (4) public sharing of photographs. In following these processes, the participants undertake a camera lesson, photo-ethics training, and related tutorial sessions (Teti et al. 2017). They are asked to take photographs that reflect the issues being investigated. The photographs that participants have taken are brought into group discussions to obtain more details about their lived experiences.

The advantage of using photovoice method involves "giving voice to participants the stimulation of reflections, and in-depth exploration of perspectives and experiences of participants" (Mysyuk and Huisman 2019, p. 2). This is because its approach aims to engage research participants in seeing their own world and transforming it (Wang and Burris 1994, 1997). Ronzi et al. (2016, p. 734) point out that "by taking photographs, the participant gradually becomes an 'interpreter of the world.'" Because the photographs are taken by participants, they are taken from their emic (insider) perspective. The researcher can then use the photographs as a technique to discuss captured images with the participants. It is understood that the interaction between researcher and participant helps to trigger the participant's perceptions and memories. It also improves the quality of communication between researcher and participant (Ronzi et al. 2016; Mysyuk and Huisman 2019).

In our study, photovoice images were employed among the participants in order to complement the in-depth interview methods used. This helped to better reflect the experiences and concerns about the issues explored in the lives of *muay Thai* fighters. Photovoice helps to learn more about the lived experiences of *muay Thai* fighters living in different campsites across Thailand. It also enhances the capacity of individuals to gain insight into their own presentation of the story from the insider's point of view (Strack et al. 2004; Tomar and Stoffel 2014).

5 Photovoice in Practice

The plan was to follow the principles of photovoice approach. In practice, however, some plans turned out to be impractical, and more appropriate techniques were utilized to suit and understand better the lifestyles and culture of the *muay Thai* fighters who participated in the study.

Photovoice principles require that ethical implications relating to the snapshots are taken into account: The individual's ownership of the photographs and their appearing in the photographs are matters that have to be explained during initial meetings. The participants were provided with information about the background to the study, its objectives, and the possible benefits of their contribution to the *muay Thai* fighter community. They were asked to complete the given consent forms relating to the people who appeared in the photographs. In addition, permission was asked to use their photographs in any subsequent report and conference presentations. Participants were guaranteed confidentiality by ensuring that the photographs will be anonymous and no real names would be used. This was an important aspect to consider, as the participants owned the photographs, and had the right to have their voices heard through the photographs and accompanying captions which will not reveal their true identity.

Although visual methods usually involve providing participants with digital cameras (Liamputtong 2020; Mysyuk and Huisman 2019), they were asked to use their mobile phones for taking photographs over a period of two weeks as these were deemed appropriate for them. The participants were informed that they were free to take any images of objects, people, places, and situations that they thought gave meanings and perceptions to the *muay Thai* profession, the lives of *muay Thai* fighters, and how the *muay Thai* profession increased their well-being and quality of life (Liamputtong 2020; Teti et al. 2017; Wang and Burris 1997).

Data from 43 trained *muay Thai* fighters were collected at their campsite from four regions of Thailand: the north, northeast, central, and southern regions. To get close to study participants who met the study criteria, a personal network approach was used. This was partly because one of the research team was training as a *muay Thai* fighter and had gained fighting experience over a long period of time. This network allowed access to *muay Thai* campsite owners and helped to form relationships and gained trust. A purposive sampling method was used to invite key informants who met the criteria of this study and could provide deep data relevant to the study purposes (Liamputtong 2020). The inclusion criteria were: (1) being a

professional *muay Thai* boxer; (2) being registered with the professional boxing association of Thailand; (3) regularly participating in competitions or fighting programs; and (4) willing to participate in the study.

To gain access to the participants, the campsite managers or campsite owners were met before the data collection was started. This was to explain to them the purpose and intention of the study and obtain their help in recruiting potential participants. The snowball sampling technique was also used as a practical method for expanding the number of key informants. The campsite owners had a well-established network of community members; each was able to direct us to further informants who could give a deeper understanding of the issues. Data was collected until saturation has reached and little new data emerged (Liamputtong 2020).

Participants were asked to take three photos for each set of questions (as indicated above), giving 12 photovoice pieces from each person. The images they took were sent directly to the first author through a social media: Facebook messenger application as this medium was most convenient for them. All images were downloaded, stored in a computer, and coded to maintain confidentiality. Two weeks later, visits were made to participants at their campsites or places that were convenient to them. The participants were asked to bring up an image that best exemplifies their lived experiences. These were discussed and perceptions shared individually rather than with others in a group discussion. This enabled them to reflect on and discuss their life stories in relation to those photographs. Thus, only individual photo reflection was conducted in this study. This is because individual *muay Thai* fighters have to carry out different training schedules and fighting programs. They also have to travel to various places to take part in fighting programs organized by the *muay Thai* organizers. It was impossible to create a platform for them to discuss these matters with other *muay Thai* fighters or invite them to discuss these matters as a group. To conduct a photovoice workshop with these participants would be difficult. When they reflected on the photographs, the sessions were audiotaped and some notes were taken to triangulate the findings and ensure the rigor of the data.

6 Being a *Muay Thai* Fighter Increases the Quality of Life

Most *muay Thai* fighters who participated in the study decided to be a *muay Thai* fighter because of economic burdens. They were living in impoverished environments. Some had no parents and lived on their own whereas many stayed with relatives and guardians. To improve their quality of life and lift their socioeconomic positions, they thought the profession could support them well. Furthermore, becoming a *muay Thai* fighter has few requirements and anyone is welcomed to such a world. They could earn a regular income and get an improved standard of living.

Income is motivation of taking up this profession. Many participants in this study gained experience and learned from their colleagues who were *muay Thai* fighters. They decided to be *muay Thai* fighters because they would be able to earn money from fighting programs. Gaining a regular income would improve their lives. San, a fighter from the northeast region, stated the following:

I decided to be a *muay Thai* fighter because I came from a poor background. . . my family was very poor. . .my life is getting better after becoming a *muay Thai* fighter.

Chai, a 22-year-old *muay Thai* fighter, also claimed:

When I was younger, I went to watch my friend's competition program. . . After the fight finished, I saw he received an amount of money; about 300 baht. I would like to have money like him. So I decided to become a fighter. Other jobs are not getting good payment like this.

He further supported the positive motivation many people have who wish to enter this world:

Muay Thai is better than other works. Can you see? Are there any jobs that we as children can earn like ten thousand baht? Can children aged 13, 14 and 15 do jobs and earn this much? I cannot see any. . .but *muay Thai* can give us lots of money.

To illustrate these views visually, he took a photograph of a car, money, and gold (see Fig. 1). He said that his family could have a good life and their status in the community had improved like others because of the *muay Thai* profession. He could earn income for his family and children.

Padon shared his thoughts:

It is a kind of sport that can provide us with very good income. We don't need to work everyday but we can earn a lot and can have time to rest. Although we get pain and injury in return, it is worth it. . .

The *muay Thai* profession was seen as a means of increasing family income. Individual fighters had to have their own saving plans. They worked very hard until they could receive sums of money, so they had to be careful about spending money. This was because they used to live within a poor economic status and had to face many difficulties in life. When they could still work, they had to save as much money as they could for their future (Figs. 2 and 3). Tom stated:



Fig. 1 The *muay Thai* profession improves the life of individuals

Fig. 2 Saving money for the future



Fig. 3 Saving money for the future



Nowadays, the lives of *muay Thai* fighters and their families are getting better. I can share living costs. . . I can look after my family which is good. . . it increased our quality of life. If I do not rely on this career, I don't have any income. . . cannot build a house and improve my social status. . . be respected by people in the community like today. . .

Many professional *muay Thai* fighters explained that, apart from the rewards they received in the form of money and valuable support staff, they received symbolic awards. The symbolic honors reflected how well they performed their role. The more they received from this reward, the better known they became as a reputable fighter. One fighter portrayed the significance of nonmonetary rewards in a visual representation (See Figs. 4 and 5). He said: “I am so proud

Fig. 4 The nonmonetary rewards a *muay Thai* fighter received



Fig. 5 The nonmonetary rewards a *muay Thai* fighter received



of myself. . . I can win the fight and am awarded a trophy. It shows who the champion of the match was. . .”

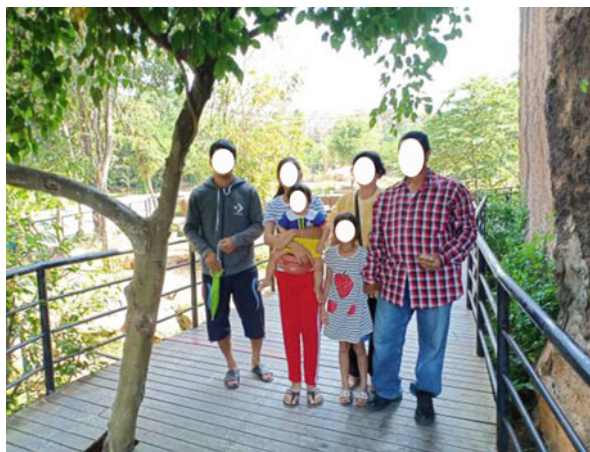
Muay Thai practice can promote an individual’s healthy living style. According to *muay Thai* principles, all fighters have to strictly follow the training programs and follow through the schedule trainers have planned for individual or groups of fighters. All participants in the study recognized that such beneficial practice could keep them from getting sick. Krit said: “*muay Thai* makes us healthy. It can prevent many diseases as we do exercise everyday. If a sick person practices *muay Thai*, they would be healed. . .” Si also supported this: “If we involve in a training program regularly, it is good for a match as we don’t get much hurt and pain while fighting. . . [the body is] more tolerance. . .” Roon, a fighter from a campsite in the northeast region, said:

I received many things from being a *muay Thai* fighter. . . I become a well-known person in community and society. . . I received good opportunities in life, not like others. . . who become drug addicts . . . But I am good in many ways. . . many people recognize me. Some institutes invite me as a guest trainer, lecturer and keynote speaker. . .

Gaining sufficient income is a predominant theme made by the majority of *muay Thai* fighters who participated in this study. When they had a sufficient and regular income, they were able to keep up a good life for their family members. Song illustrated this through a photograph (see Fig. 6). He pointed out that he and his family could have good standard of living like other people, and his better economic status raised his social status. This was a feature of his personal profile. As an individual, he was more confident about doing things and exercising social responsibility. He could take family members on visits to places as they wished, which made them happy.

Some pointed out that *muay Thai* meant everything in their life. It had provided them with a new life. If they had not entered the *muay Thai* world, they could not

Fig. 6 Getting a family member a better life



imagine how their lives would have been. Many stated that they would have had no good future and would have remained with a low social status. About two-thirds remarked that they would have become involved in drugs and the criminal community. San supported this:

Muay Thai give me new life. . .I have many things to enhance good life like today because of *muay Thai* [profession]. It also promotes my health. . .and becoming a well known person to the public. . .it means everything, really.

Chu, a 24-year-old fighter, shared his view through photographs (See Fig. 7). He explained that he had ambitions to be a national champion *muay Thai*. He would use his efforts and skills to win fights and the championship, and this would make his family and Thai people proud of him. He also felt very happy because he could make many people happy. He was very happy when people showed appreciation for his efforts.

The *muay Thai* profession provided career opportunities for all *muay Thai* fighters. People who practice *muay Thai* and become a skillful practitioner can make it their career. Many of *muay Thai* fighters were also studying for different degrees because they had an income from this profession to pay for their study fees and daily expenses. All agreed that they can reduce family expenses for this matter and their parents could use money for other costs.

Fig. 7 Pride of well-recognized status in Thai society



For me... *muay Thai* gives me many things... I can have a career and earn income for my family... I am so proud of myself... I can look after my parents and family members... I can give them money... (Krit)

Becoming a *muay Thai* fighter is relatively feasible for anyone, but few people choose to do so. Key people who have influenced their decisions about becoming a *muay Thai* fighter included family members and friends. These people expected them to preserve this profession in their families. A person who has forebears or family members who were *muay Thai* fighters might in turn take up the role of fighter themselves, partly because they are trained in the craft by these key persons. A common factor found in this study was that being close to a *muay Thai* fighter and being involved in the training process helped individuals make a natural transition into the profession. Krit reflected on his motivation to be a *muay Thai* fighter:

In the past, I was staying in the house and I saw senior *muay Thai* fighter training... I liked it very much... [I] decided to walk in to get close to them and observed their practice... I then joined the training...

Canne shared his experience:

My dad love *muay Thai*... at the beginning, he took me to a *muay Thai* campsite to see the training. He asked me to try and I liked it as it is a smart sport...

Parents were key persons who encouraged them to take up this profession. Fathers especially were fond of *muay Thai* sport. They preferred their boys to practice this kind of sport. They took their children with them every time they went to a *muay Thai* match. This was a natural way to make children absorb this traditional art thereby hoping that they would enter this world. Sok shared his thoughts: "My dad had encouraged me since I was very young... if dad didn't take me to the training, I was angry...crying... It became part of [my] life." Krit also pointed out the following:

My mom and dad know I would like to be a *muay Thai* fighter, they always support me... never blame me. They took me to *muay Thai* campsites as I can be there and trained under the supervision of experienced coaches...

More than one-third of the *muay Thai* fighters told that they became *muay Thai* fighters because of their personal interest. Many felt that they liked this kind of sport when they were very young. They often visited *muay Thai* campsites and observed the practice regularly. This allowed them to learn and absorb its principles and learn about the martial arts. As a result, these features have been embedded in their lives. The *muay Thai* profession then became their preferred sport, and they took it up as a career. Canne appreciated this *muay Thai* art and told how a poster influenced his mind, leading him to this world. This powerful art is shown in Figs. 8 and 9:

Fig. 8 A beautiful martial art**Fig. 9** A beautiful martial art

7 Life Security Plans

Each *muay Thai* campsite owner encourages their *muay Thai* members to undertake higher education. Obtaining higher education degree promotes a good profile for *muay Thai* fighters. They also enter new professions when they have retired from this profession. Many have received good opportunities to continue their studies after entering the *muay Thai* profession. They are encouraged by people around them that, although *muay Thai* fighting can earn them good income which enhances their level of living, they cannot continue being a fighter for the rest of their life. Most have to retire at the age of 30. Thus, they need to have a permanent job for life after *muay Thai* fighting. Nearly all *muay Thai* fighters who participated in the study wished to continue their studies on either full-time or part-time programs when training as *muay Thai* professionals.

Fig. 10 Wishing to obtain higher education at a university for the future



Kris thought that he would gain educational degrees at the highest level that he could. It ensures him that he would have a good life after retiring from being a *muay Thai* fighter. Education was seen as an important factor as it could support him in a proper job. He could earn income for his family as he did not want his family members to face a difficult life. This photograph represents his thought about obtaining education qualifications (Fig. 10).

All the participants thought that the *muay Thai* profession played an important role in preventing drug addiction and alcohol intake among the youth of Thailand. This was because its principles and practice had created strict rules and regulations about the sport. Individuals had to follow these in their routine training everyday, and this could shape the behavior of an individual fighter in a proper way. Sok said the following: “If there is no rule, [I] won’t be disciplined. . . it keeps me far-off from drugs.” Another *muay Thai* fighter, Krit, agreed:

Muay Thai helps me to stay away from drug addiction. . . I always follow good behaviour. I don’t go for alcohol. . . go to bed on time, for example. . . it is very good as I don’t go off the track or behave badly. . .

Chai added his ideas:

Cigarettes. . . drugs. . . we don’t go for it. . . we have strict rules [that] we have to stick to. We have no time to think about these things. . . By the time we get used to these rules. . . we behave in a good way. . . we chose *muay Thai*. . .

Most *muay Thai* fighters who participated in this study stated that they could arrange their study program and training schedule properly. This was because the classes followed office hours: from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. The first round of a training program was mainly running or jogging along the street in the early morning, from 5 a.m. to 7 a.m., depending on the individual’s management. They had free time during the day. Most fighters spent their time in the campsite while some went out for

a short period. Every time they went outside the campsite, they had to inform and obtain permission from the campsite director. This was to ensure their safety. The second round of activity commonly began at 3 p.m. and ended at about 8 p.m. Although they had to go for fighting as planned, they managed their study well. Most tried to finish their courses on time.

Muay Thai fighters had to stick to training programs designed by campsite trainers. The training in *muay Thai* was always intense. Each campsite designed training programs with similar schedules. The trainees had to follow the schedule as their daily practice. They had to do a very early morning run at about 5 a.m. Individual fighters started with running or jogging in the early morning for about 5–10 km to boost their physical fitness. They then took some rest, a shower, had breakfast, and then took rest. The training programs started again in the late afternoon and continued until late at night. After the program, each took a shower, had dinner, and went to bed. Bed time was at about 9 p.m. They were allowed to use mobile phones at specific times of the day or for emergency purposes. It was found that the time they were allowed to use mobile phone was mostly after jogging in the morning, before the evening training program, and after dinner. This strict routine prevented them from doing mistakes such as drugs, alcohol, or gambling.

8 Becoming Better Known in Society

Individual *muay Thai* fighters in the study were proud individuals. They could have a better life today because of this profession. Its rules and regulations, drawn up by *muay Thai* campsites, helped them follow a proper way of living and prepared them to deal with the real world. They led lives carefully based on their context and circumstances. Outsiders would admire their lives and practice. Roon, a fighter from a northeast campsite, stated:

I received many things from being a *muay Thai* fighter. . . I worked hard. . . now I have become a well-known person in society. . . I have received good opportunities in life not like others. . . they have become drug addicted persons. . . But I am good in many ways. . . many people recognize me.

He further added the following:

Everyone in my town watched the fighting program on television. . . all cheer me on. . . when I come home, they called my name. . . they said that I did very well [I] am so proud of myself. . . this gave me lots of encouragement. . .

Kanon, a 25-year-old *muay Thai* fighter, explained how he is proud of himself because he became well known to people in society. He even paid more attention to his training program and tried to seek knowledge from different sources to develop his fighting skills to satisfy his fans (Fig. 11).

Fig. 11 Being proud of being known to society



9 Conclusion and Future Directions

The *muay Thai* profession provides good opportunities for Thai people in many ways. It is obvious that *muay Thai* fighting provides individuals with incomes, and all recognize it as a key factor in gaining a higher social status and quality of life among *muay Thai* fighters in this study. Apart from this advantage, many gain reputations through regularly winning fights and becoming well known in the *muay Thai* world. This even gives them more opportunities to improve their ability and please the public. This is a lifecycle for *muay Thai* fighters and is a way to keep building up their qualifications which increase their social status. As most are from poor families in rural Thailand, the profession helps them become more socially inclusive in Thai society.

The photovoice method is a practical technique that allows to gain a deeper understanding of the lives of *muay Thai* fighters, as it allows them to better express their ideas about the issues under investigation. This method should be adopted wider in health and social science research, particularly when researchers work with vulnerable and marginalized individuals or conduct sensitive research. Despite some challenges, meaningful data were collected from male participants who tend to find it difficult to express their lives verbally.

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