

Life in and out of combat clubs: the experiences of Iranian martial artists

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Abstract

Considering the mechanized modern living in restricted indoor spaces, aggression and mental disorders among young people and adults and their negative consequences in Iran, in-depth studies of this issue are important. The purpose of this article is to understand the meaning of combat sports for Iranian athletes and to understand how it drives them to action. Following an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, 17 male kickboxing and muay Thai athletes in the Kurdistan province in western Iran were surveyed through semi-structured interviews. Four main themes and 12 sub-themes were extracted from analyzing the experiences of the research participants: (1) Increasing existential capacity, (2) cultivating a moral personality, (3) enhancing one's health and (4) improving one's lifestyle. Our research suggests that, for these participants, kickboxing and muay Thai have a positive effect in many mental, social and moral dimensions of existence. Moreover, because of the potential positive impact on the individual behavior, these sports are also very effective in reducing societal problems such as hooliganism, destructiveness and vandalism, suicide, inappropriate lifestyle, decline of values and violence.

Keywords: Martial arts; combat sports; kickboxing; muay Thai; character development; health; wellbeing; violence prevention.

Vida dentro y fuera de los clubes de combate: experiencias de artistas marciales iraníes

Resumen

Teniendo en cuenta el estilo de vida moderno, mecanizado y desarrollado en espacios interiores restringidos, la agresividad y los trastornos mentales entre jóvenes y adultos, y sus consecuencias negativas en Irán, es importante realizar estudios en profundidad sobre esta cuestión. El propósito de este artículo es comprender el significado que tienen los deportes de combate para deportistas iraníes y entender cómo dicho significado les impulsa a practicarlos. Siguiendo un enfoque de Análisis Fenomenológico Interpretativo (AFI), se realizaron entrevistas semiestructuradas a 17 practicantes de kickboxing y muay thai de la provincia de Kurdistán, al oeste de Irán. Del análisis de sus experiencias se extrajeron cuatro temas principales y 12 subtemas: (1) aumento de la capacidad existencial, (2) cultivo moral de la personalidad, (3) mejora de la propia salud y (4) mejora del propio estilo de vida. Los resultados sugieren que, para estos participantes, el kickboxing y el muay thai tienen un efecto positivo en muchas dimensiones de la existencia, a nivel mental, social y moral. Además, debido al potencial impacto positivo en el comportamiento individual, estos deportes también son muy eficaces para reducir problemas sociales como el hooliganismo, la destrucción y el vandalismo, el

A vida dentro e fora dos clubes de luta: experiências de artistas marciais iranianos

Resumo

Tendo em conta o estilo de vida moderno, mecanizado e restrito aos recintos fechados, a agressividade e os distúrbios mentais entre jovens e adultos, e as suas consequências negativas no Irão, é importante realizar estudos aprofundados sobre esta questão. O objetivo deste artigo é compreender o significado dos desportos de combate para os atletas iranianos e perceber como esse significado os leva a praticar desportos de combate. Seguindo uma abordagem de Análise Fenomenológica Interpretativa (AFI), foram realizadas entrevistas semiestructuradas a 17 praticantes de kickboxing e muay thai da província do Curdistão, no oeste do Irão. Da análise das suas experiências emergiram quatro temas principais e 12 subtemas: (1) reforço da capacidade existencial, (2) cultivo moral da personalidade, (3) melhoria da saúde e (4) melhoria do estilo de vida. Os resultados sugerem que, para estes participantes, o kickboxing e o muay thai têm um efeito positivo em muitas dimensões da existência, a nível mental, social e moral. Além disso, devido ao potencial impacto positivo no comportamento individual, estes desportos são também muito eficazes na redução de problemas sociais como o hooliganismo, a destruição e o vandalismo, o

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suicidio, el estilo de vida inadecuado, la pérdida de valores y la violencia.

Palabras clave: Artes marciales; deportes de combate; kickboxing; muay thai; desarrollo del carácter; salud; bienestar; prevención de la violencia.

suicídio, o estilo de vida inadequado, a perda de valores e a violência.

Palavras-chave: Artes marciais; desportos de combate; kickboxing; muay thai; desenvolvimento do carácter; saúde; bem-estar; prevenção da violência.

1. Introduction

In contemporary Iranian society, exercise and physical activity are becoming increasingly important for individuals. People prefer to engage in sports for health, strength, happiness, and to avoid the stress of daily life with physical activity (Doğusan & Koçak, 2021). Combat sports (CS) are one of the most popular forms of sport today, and their scientific support is one of the main tasks of modern sports science (Podrigalo et al., 2022). Combat sports have been rapidly growing in popularity over the past two decades. In the 2020 Olympic Games, there were six CS, accounting for a significant number of gold medals available (Zhong et al., 2024). Interest in martial arts in general has increased dramatically in recent years, with an estimated excess of 75 million teenagers around the world actively participating in at least one martial arts class (Sahebozamani & Beyranvand, 2016). In professional sports, CS has attracted millions of spectators, especially in the cases of professional boxing and mixed martial arts (Franchini et al., 2012). The rapid development of CS has led to more athletes participating in combat competitions and more events for athletes each year (Zhong et al., 2024).

Martial arts were initially learned by a practitioner to protect oneself or brawl against another person (Nardini & Épron, 2021; Harwood-Gross et al., 2020). In their evolution, many martial arts have developed a competitive side and turned into combat sports (for example, kickboxing & muay Thai) (Lafuente et al., 2021). In addition to self-protection, combat sports are also used for children's education, character development, physical fitness, mental strength, spirituality, and progress (Mülhim & Akcan, 2022). Combat sports have many benefits for those who practice them. These benefits include physical and psychological aspects, such as reducing negative emotional reactions, increasing balance, and improving cardiovascular and musculoskeletal fitness (Sur et al., 2021).

Combat sports include a wide range of sports disciplines (Ciaccioni et al., 2023) and a diverse group of physical cultures that teach fighting techniques and include more than 200 distinct disciplines, consisting of thousands of branches and styles that each which have their own educational philosophies and traditions (Bu et al., 2010; Kim & Moon, 2015). Given that, in addition to sports clubs, combat sports techniques can be applied in many places and situations (in school classroom settings, street conflicts, etc.), this issue raises questions and ambiguities. Because this special characteristic of combat sports has placed it as a challenge between social sciences and sports sciences to determine whether combat sports are just sports or can be a specific site of social behavior as well (Shahnooshi & Ghasemi, 2010). This study seeks to examine the lived experiences of Iranian athletes from two popular combat sports, kickboxing and muay Thai. It aims to explore the experiences of these athletes in terms of how the combat sports in question have contributed distinctive and positive experiences to their everyday lives.

2. Literature Review

There are many types of (often contentious) martial arts classifications with overlapping and combining similar elements. For example, martial arts with "internal" categories for developing the body's internal energy (such as Taijiquan) versus "external" with more emphasis on physical strength, speed and agility (such as kickboxing and muay Thai) (Ciaccioni et al. al., 2023). The most common forms of martial arts include muay Thai, kickboxing, taekwondo, karate, wushu, boxing, judo, Brazilian jiu-jitsu (BJJ), pencak silat and mixed martial arts (MMA) (Holmes et al., 2023; Dongoran et al., 2020). "Kickboxing" is a martial art that requires complex skills and tactical excellence to succeed (Ouergui et al., 2014). Success in combat and overcoming an opponent requires gaining more points by hitting and punching or by achieving a technical knockout during a regular match that includes three 2-minute rounds with a 1-minute recovery between rounds (Ouergui et al.,

2014). Muay Thai is also one of the martial arts sports from the Far East, one of the sports that attracts the attention of the world. The art is also known as Thai boxing or “the art of the 8 limbs”, as athletes can use their fists, knees, elbows, kicks and holds to fight their opponents. A muay Thai match lasts about 3 to 5 rounds of 3 minutes, depending on the skill of the athletes. Like many other combat sports, competitors are matched in weight (Turner, 2009). Further, at the 138th International Olympic Committee session in 2021, muay Thai received full IOC recognition, preparing muay Thai for eventual integration into regularly occurring Olympic events (Croom, 2023). The nature of the activity involved depends on the individual's level. Classes usually start with a 15 to 30-minute warm-up, stretching and calisthenics session. In general, it is followed by kicking, punching, knee and elbow exercises and then different amounts of pad, bag and sparring work. Novices are not allowed to fight. Amateur levels are full contact bouts that use shin pads, groin pads, body pads, boxing gloves, elbow pads, mouth guards, and head guards. Professionals also have full contact, but only use mouth guards, groin guards and boxing gloves. Hitting the whole body is allowed except for the groin and back of the head and trunk/spine (Gartland et al., 2001).

Some philosophers argue that martial arts and combat sports training is maladaptive, contributes to psychological illness, and provides a social harm (Dixon, 2015), whereas others argue that martial arts training is adaptive, contributes to psychological wellness, and provides a social benefit (Croom, 2022). Today, martial arts are often considered an element of global culture, seen both as a form of self-defense and as recreational and health exercises (Warchoł et al., 2021). Socially, martial arts, with their centuries-old traditions, carry many desirable values and have been used in Eastern societies for many years as effective educational systems for children and adolescents (Görner et al., 2019). What distinguishes martial arts from hostile or physical violence (as in street fights and unprovoked attacks) is the organization of their techniques and tactics into a coherent system, adherence to a philosophy of life or code of conduct, and the coding of effective methods tested in antiquity (Contiero, 2019). There are varying beliefs about the effects of practicing martial arts on mental and social well-being. The study of martial arts has seen growth in research and presentations at sports scientific congresses and more specific events dedicated to martial arts studies itself. A key debate is whether martial arts practice is beneficial for psychological well-being and social benefits, or if it is detrimental and causes harm (Croom, 2022).

While in the West, muay Thai is associated with hard fighting and perceived as a combat sport, indigenously it is also treated as a way of improving the human character. In martial arts, understood to be a fragment of the art of living, the main goal for some schools and practitioners is to improve one's humanity (Cynarski, 2022). Traditional muay Thai claims to promote physical and mental growth, and many coaches place great emphasis on discipline, respect, and spirituality. Its popularity is growing rapidly, and it has about one million practitioners worldwide (Gartland et al., 2001). Studies have shown the beneficial effects of Far Eastern martial arts on healthy people and people with various diseases, and it has been reported that these sports can increase physical and motor abilities (Haksever et al., 2021, Sur et al., 2021, Warchoł et al., 2021, Bu et al., 2010).

On the other hand, some researchers have also provided evidence for the negative effects of martial arts involvement among adolescents. For example, a Norwegian study concluded that participating in “power sports” such as weightlifting, wrestling and oriental martial arts (karate, judo, and taekwondo) leads to an increase in antisocial behavior in youth (Endresen & Olweus, 2005). These results led to a great deal of controversy in several countries, leading into vehement discussions in various media and online outlets regarding the alleged effects of the practice of martial arts on the young participant, ranging from very positive to very negative (Vertonghen & Theeboom, 2010). The information presented above indicates that uncertainties exist regarding social-psychological outcomes of martial arts practice on young participants. It is therefore worthwhile to review findings of the major studies dealing with this topic.

Research on various martial arts has documented its benefits in training self-control, increasing self-esteem and confidence, creating greater emotional stability, learning, assertiveness, and improving self-awareness (Harwood et al., 2017). In addition, as stated by Fung and Lee (2018), martial arts emphasize self-exalting and self-enhancing characteristics, such as self-cultivation, self-control, respect, benevolence, pacifism, and appreciation of nature. A study by Chen and Cheesman (2013) found that martial artists who train at higher levels have higher mental toughness. Moreover,



as noted by Harwood et al. (2017), martial arts have shown the ability to improve self-awareness monitoring and cognitive regulation, which can help monitor one's mental health problems. Bu et al. (2010) stated that the advantage of martial arts over standard health care is that, unlike prescription drugs, it is relatively inexpensive and has a number of health benefits for physical and mental health. Since some of the literature examines inexperienced people for whom martial arts are relatively new, as such, it cannot conclusively show how much martial arts can improve mental health. In addition, some research has shown conflicting results, including in the areas of anger (Kostorz, & Sas-Nowosielski, 2021, Kotarska et al., 2019, Bu et al., 2010).

Mental health disorders, as one of the most obvious global health challenges today, have caused many concerns for health systems, health professionals and policymakers, and are a major factor in the growth of complications and disabilities caused by ill health in the world (Noorbala et al., 2020). Studies show that mental disorders are one of the main causes of suicide and 87-90% of people who commit suicide have at least one mental disorder (Brière et al., 2015; Noorbala et al., 2020). In a 2014 study, one in five adults in the world reported having a mental disorder in the past 12 months (Steel et al., 2014). The deputy of the mental health office of the Ministry of Health announced that according to the results of a national survey conducted in 2019, the number of people suffering from mental disorders in Iran has increased to 29% (Office of Mental Health of the Ministry of Health of Iran). Anxiety disorders are the most common mental illness, and approximately half of people with anxiety disorders also have depression (American Association for Anxiety and Depression).

Symptoms of mental illness and stress cause mental problems and physiological problems and cause problems in society. Some psychological problems may include sadness, frustration, irritability, nervousness, and suicidal thoughts (NIMH, 2019). Even outside of mental illness, many people struggle with psychological symptoms such as stress or anger; Barlow and Durand (2008), point out, there is a link between anxiety and stress, where the way a person copes with stress affects anxiety (Kaufmann, 2022). One's youth is considered one of the most important, turbulent and sensitive age periods in an individual developmental phases, and it is one of the important stages in the socialization of activists, creating development, regularization, institutionalizing social and moral norms, and has a prominent role in the development of the issue of psychological and social security (Saadati, 2020). Therefore, during this phase especially that can reduce depression, anxiety, stress and anger and contribute to good health should be considered. We know that exercise can be beneficial, but we do not specifically know what kind of exercise (Kaufmann, 2022).

While some studies report an increase in antisocial behavior as a result of participation in martial arts, other findings point to more positive social and individual development (Vertonghen et al., 2014). Martial arts may intensify aggressive tendencies and make it easier to evacuate them in daily life by shaping certain personality traits (courage, assertiveness) along with increasing the physical likelihood of harming others. External motivations can motivate individuals to practice martial arts through instrumental desire to acquire skills for coping with situations of physical conflict (Kostorz & Sas-Nowosielski, 2021). The results from empirical research support the hypothesis that martial arts training can contribute to psychological well-being by contributing to the five elements of psychological well-being, including positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (Croom, 2022). Nosanchuk and MacNeil (1989) point out that in martial arts the philosophy that permeates is that of reaching the Zen state of *mushin*, a state in which the participant is able to fight to the fullest but without aggressive feelings. Many people, in the beginning, enter this sport with the purpose and motivation of aggression, fighting and conflict with others; however, with the passage of time, humility tends to overcome these fighters and they take on a quiet character while being authoritative and strong. Some people are extremely isolated and have a lack of self-confidence or feel worthless when they first arrive, but after a while these feelings disappear in many of them (Allahveisi, 2024). This is carried out through demanding respect for the teacher, the practice space and others, and also highlighting the importance of meditation and philosophies such as peace, benevolence and humanity among others (Nosanchuk & MacNeil, 1989).

It is important to be specific in our research in the martial arts, since general claims such as "the martial arts improve physical fitness" and "the martial arts improve psychological well-being"

(Fuller & Lloyd, 2020) fail to provide us with important information about the actual martial arts in question, given the important fact that distinct martial arts can provide distinct physical and psychological benefits to practitioners (Contiero, 2019). For example, tai chi and muay Thai are clearly distinct and very different forms of martial arts, which may offer very different physical and psychological benefits to their respective practitioners. Accordingly, in order to investigate the extent to which distinct martial arts contribute distinct physical and psychological benefits to practitioners, we must investigate specific martial arts and not merely theorize about the martial arts in a general way. In fact, by doing careful research on specific martial arts, we will become better positioned to subsequently draw theoretical generalizations that are grounded in specific findings from empirical research (Croom, 2022). Knowing all these things, kickboxing and muay Thai should be investigated. Due to the variety of techniques and kicks used in them, as well as fewer restrictions on the use of hand and foot kicks compared to other martial arts such as karate, kung fu, taekwondo, etc., the excitement of these sports for the number of participants is enhanced (for example, in muay Thai, all elbow, knee, fist, and foot techniques are allowed). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to understand the meaning of combat sports for Iranian athletes and to understand how it drives them to act.

3. Research methods

The current research was conducted in a qualitative manner following a phenomenological approach, which was adopted to investigate the lived experiences of combat athletes. Phenomenology is generally a broad, multidisciplinary, and controversial interpretative perspective that has been used in very different ways in different disciplinary contexts (Allen-Collinson, 2009). Phenomenologists are different in their orientations. Nevertheless, they are united by considering the human experience as the fundamental subject of study (Ryba, 2008). Phenomenology provides a powerful analytical framework for exploring sport and physical activity (Allen-Collinson, 2009), and it helps us to better understand the meaning and nature of athletes' lived experiences.

According to the phenomenological approach, the person actively participates in the creation of the perceived world. In order to understand the essence or structure of an experience, researchers combine and classify lived experiences and firsthand accounts of different people about a phenomenon. In fact, with greater awareness, researchers are able to gain insight or understanding of the essence of a phenomenon (Tufford & Newman, 2012). The present study also used the interpretive phenomenology approach first proposed by Heidegger (1988). This approach provides more understanding of the phenomenon and the researcher should use his/her foreknowledge to interpret and analyse the data. Also, the 7-step Diekmann et al. (1989) method was used for data analysis (see Vagle, 2018 for more studies).

The present study was led by semi-structured interviews (Savin-Baden & Major, 2023), including questions about: 1. How the participants understand combat sports; 2. The experiences they gained from their own combat sport; and 3. The factors that led them to their experiences, and continued until the participants' depth of experience was gained. In addition to this, the demographic characteristics of the participants, such as sports records, age, educational and professional records, and economic status, were also collected. The interview method was individual so that the participant could express their lived experiences in relation to their participation in this sport in complete peace and confidentiality. Interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants on a smart mobile telephone device and prepared for qualitative analysis. Each interview was recorded in a private location in the selected setting of the Adrian Sports Club, and at the end of each interview, the conversations were written on paper and examined to analyze and organize the themes. The average interview time was about 40 minutes.

The statistical population included all athletes engaged in kickboxing and muay Thai in the Kurdistan province in western Iran. In selecting the study group, a Homogeneous sampling method, one of the purposeful sampling methods was used (Patton, 2001). To meet the criteria of the study group, participants needed to be athletes 18 years of age or older who had been involved in kickboxing or muay Thai for at least 5 years. Regarding the sample size in qualitative studies, the sample size could not be estimated at the beginning of the research and the researcher will continue to interview participants until he/she obtains an acceptable picture of the desired phenomenon and



the increase of the sample group will continue to some extent. This process was continued until the researchers found no new findings – a principle known as saturation (Marshall et al., 2018). In this study, the data saturation point came at 17 interviews with a range of men from different demographic characteristics. Due to the fact that women's combat sports in Kurdistan province do not have a long history, only two female athletes met the criteria of the group, and those two people were not willing to be interviewed by us.

Table 1. Participants' demographics.

Name	Age	Years of Experience	Sports	Education
Foad	39	6	Kickboxing	Associate degree
Payam	20	5	Kickboxing	High school degree
Omid	27	5	Muay Thai	Associate degree
Khabat	50	30	Kickboxing	Associate degree
Arvin	28	10	Kickboxing	High school degree
Amjad	18	6	Muay Thai	High school degree
Arman	23	7	Muay Thai	High school degree
Mohsen	28	12	Kickboxing	Associate degree
Mardin	18	5	Muay Thai	High school degree
Kianosh	23	10	Kickboxing	Bachelor of science
Babak	20	6	Muay Thai	Associate degree
Reza	18	6	Muay Thai	High school degree
Hazhir	47	6	Kickboxing	Bachelor of science
Ali	22	7	Muay Thai	Bachelor of science
Kawe	34	20	Kickboxing	Master of science
Danial	24	7	Kickboxing	High school degree
Karo	21	9	Muay Thai	Bachelor of science

Ethical issues that were observed in this research as much as possible are: obtaining informed consent from participants to participate in the research, recording all interviews with the permission of participants and providing explanations about the objectives of the research and the reason for recording the interview session, keeping the interview file in a safe place, fidelity in transferring interview texts from recording to recording, observing the principle of confidentiality of information, respecting the opinion of the participants even when requesting to leave the investigation and using pseudonyms of the participants to keep them anonymous.

In this study, for the complete emergence of themes in the data, the method of thematic analysis introduced by Diekmann et al. (1989) was used (see also Vagle, 2018). The work of data analysis started at the same time as the first interview was conducted. To analyze the data, we followed the Diekmann et al. (1989) method, which is a team-based, seven-step process based on this type of phenomenology (Polit & Beck, 2004), in the order of the following steps: First, after each interview, the recorded text along with the field notes were written on paper. Then these texts were computer typed and reviewed several times to get a general understanding of it. In the second stage, an interpretative summary was written for each of the interview texts and an attempt was made to understand and extract the meanings hidden in the interviews. In the third stage, the researcher, with the help of the research team members, exchanged opinions about the extracted semantic units and their contents. In the fourth stage, in order to clarify and resolve any disagreements and contradictions in the interpretations, the process of going back to the texts and sometimes referring to the participants was done repeatedly (hermeneutic round or cycle). And the similar semantic units were formed more analytically and more generally, and by categorizing similar semantic units, sub-themes and main themes were formed. In the sixth step, a final interpretation or structural statement that expresses the link and relationship between the sub-themes and the extracted themes are written. Finally, in the seventh stage, a draft version of the themes and sub-themes and a selection of the interview texts are at the disposal of the research team members and an external observer familiar with phenomenological research, and their comments and suggestions were included in the final version of the project report.

The qualitative findings were evaluated using the four criteria of Lincoln and Guba (1985), for the trustworthiness, credibility and transferability of the extracted themes, help was taken from seven martial arts athletes. They declared that these sub-categories and sub-themes are in a way indicative of the common lived experiences of martial arts athletes. Also, for the dependability and confirmability of the categories and themes and the data analysis process, the opinions of two sports sociology experts were used and approved by them. In addition to which we were constantly thinking about our research collaborations. The research team then contacted a British martial arts scholar and qualitative researcher, who assisted them in editing the manuscript in the English language while offering the perspective of a critical friend, leading to a revised representation of the project.

4. Findings

In the information obtained from explaining the experiences of the research participants, four main themes and 15 secondary themes were extracted. In the following, the extracted themes and sub-themes are explained.

1) *Increased existential capacity*

The experiences of the participants showed the fact that after several years of activity in combat sports, they have become more chivalrous, determined, brave, self-controlled, a better role model, and so on.

- *Strong will and tenacity*: A number of participants mentioned endurance and stubbornness in their narratives. For example, enduring and doing hard exercises in this kind of sport requires high willpower and has made them so stubborn that many of the big problems of their lives for them have either been reduced or they have been able to cope. Kianosh says:

This sport even gives me the strength to endure problems. sometimes I was hit hard and I could not sleep at night because of the pain. instead I became stronger and it made me more mature and relieved me of the pains and hardships of life.

Amjad says: "The main lesson I learned from my sport was that I should never be disappointed. If I do my best, I will definitely get results. I experienced this through my sport".

- *Increase self-confidence*: One of the main and most obvious characteristics of all veteran fighters all over the world is courage and self-confidence. Most of the participants in this study also mentioned reducing fear and stress, risk-taking, courage, boldness, and so on. Amjad recalls:

I used to be very overweight. I was embarrassed to go to the pool or go out with my friends. I was embarrassed to change clothes in the boutique. All this was a push for me to come to my senses and start my sport. Now my self-confidence is very good. Now my body is completely fit and I take photos with my body without clothes and post them on my Instagram page and even as a champion I am continuing my sports. My sport completely changed my life.

Payam says:

My attitude towards myself has changed and my self-confidence has improved a lot. There used to be a lot of things I said I could not and could not do. But now that I am in a good position in sports, I can do things I could not do before now."

- *Mental strength*: Several participants mentioned improving their academic status and increasing concentration and strength of mind, and they considered this to be the result of doing special mental exercises and concentrating on combat sports exercises. Kawe says:

This sport has strengthened my mind a lot. Many of the exercises we did were shadowing and mental exercises. We were not performing on a real opponent, but on a hypothetical opponent, and that required a lot of mental strength.

Mardin comments:



Before, I was not very good at studying because I was distracted a lot. But later in the club, it happened a lot that I had to repeat a technique over and over again on the pads and punching bag and focus on how to perform it so that I could perform it correctly. I feel that this helped me a lot in my studies because now I can easily focus on a subject and study it for hours.

- *Ability to defend oneself:* According to the interviews, one of the main reasons for the tendency to combat sports in different participants, regardless of age, was the ability to defend themselves in different situations. In fact, all participants mentioned that the sport helped them to have the strength and ability to defend themselves. Reza says: "I used to be very weak and sometimes, my peers would harass me in the street or at school and I couldn't defend myself, but now I can and I gained confidence." Amjad says: "My body is always ready. Wherever I have a problem, I can defend myself on my own."

2) Cultivation of moral character

One of the main goals and missions of combat sports is to cultivate moral character in athletes, in which the coach has the main task as the leader of the club environment and policy maker. Based on the results of this study, all the participants acknowledged that combat sports humbled and socialized the athletes and gave them credibility. All of them mentioned the coach as an inspirational figure in their sports life.

- *Humility:* Humility, modesty and lack of pride were the themes that the participants mentioned directly. Combat sports give strength to the athlete, and over time, this strength gives them self-confidence, and this self-confidence causes the athletes in this field, while being strong and powerful, do not need to be compared to others, as a humble and grounded human being. Foad comments:

The first experience I got from this sport is humility. The first session I went to, I entered the club, although I was older than all of them, but the person in the soft line in front of us was much younger than me, and I realized that I should not be proud and I should follow it.

Khabat reflected:

I used to complain a lot about everything. I even complained a lot in competitions and I was sensitive. But over time, it became clear to me that I should not have such a martial personality. A martial artist may even get to the point where he becomes quiet and introverted and feels that he does not need to argue with anyone. Maybe sometimes he sees himself as smaller as he goes through.

- *Social prestige:* All participants directly or indirectly acknowledged that several years of activity in combat sports have brought them respect and good social status, trust, ethics and good behavior, and so on. Also, although this type of sport is an individual discipline, its exercises are usually done in groups, and this has caused each of them to find many friends in this environment and interact with successful and healthy people. In today's society, it can be very difficult for some to find peers with different interests and perspectives, especially in adulthood. Combat sports are a potential place to meet new people from all walks of life. Kawe reflects:

The respect that exists in kickboxing halls is also used in life. For example, when you respect the coach and fellow club members, when you go to another group, that respect is embedded in your behavior. Reza says: "My sport has made me proud in many places and the titles I won have given me credit in my family and the people around me. My friends don't treat me like they used to and they treat me more seriously.

- *Getting inspiration from the coach:* In this study, participants also mentioned the role of the coach as a role model and charisma in the formation of their own moral personality. Khabat says:

Most martial artists train for the love of their master. I take God as my witness that if he is not my teacher, I will definitely give up my sport. If my teacher is not there, my love will die. A teacher is like a mother bird who goes around looking for food for her children and when she returns, all her children open their mouths and expect food. I consider the teacher to his student to be exactly like this bird that if he doesn't have anything for his children, one by one they become weak and die. In conclusion, all these things that

we say we learn from martial arts, we definitely learned all manners, education, politeness, submission, etc. from our coach, this is not just my words, it is a pure fact.

Arman added: "My coach is very valuable to me. He always motivated me. His words influenced me a lot. I always learned from his words and I wanted to exercise and be by his side for several hours a day".

3) *Gaining health*

Acquiring health is another main theme of this study, which was obtained based on the results of interview analysis. Obviously, in many sports, health is one of the main goals of that sport. The significant difference that the athletes participating in this study have mentioned is related to gaining mental health, which along with physical health was undoubtedly one of the common experiences of all athletes participating in this activity.

- *Mental health*: In addition to gaining physical health, many participants mentioned the elimination of depression, gaining a good and calm feeling, having a beautiful and fit body, reaching the ideal weight, expending excess energy, and so on. Kawe says:

When my friends would gather in the neighborhood and they were all busy fighting, I would go to the gym to release my energy there and be even further away from that crowd. Because kickboxing was freer than all other sports at that time, I chose it. After I practiced, I felt very light and felt good. I used to release the violence that was inside me at the gym, and after training I would calm down a lot.

Kianosh says: "It was like a sedative morphine for me. I always completely forgot and refined myself when I came to the club when I was in a lot of trouble or nervous".

4) *Improved Lifestyle*

Participants believe that combat sports have been able to affect their lifestyle in a variety of ways.

- *Avoidance of negative atmosphere*: The experience of some participants showed that activity in combat sports has caused them to stay away from negative atmosphere, toxic work environments and disruptive people. Kawe says:

The environment in which I lived was unsuitable, and when I got into kickboxing I was very far away from those people. When you work in combat sports, you never go to work and negative behaviors in terms of social behaviors. You do not smoke. Because if you are a smoker, it has a negative effect on your exercise and you will lose your breath. And if the goal is martial arts and sports, you will not pursue those things at all".

Amjad says:

I used to be very much in the thug phase. I put the energy I used to watch those stories into training and exercising and it really changed me and my perspective changed. Here, I am healthier and away from many negative things. When my friends used to come to the street, I used to go to the club and gradually I distanced myself from them and found new friends in the club and didn't go with the old ones anymore.

- *Responsibility*: Based on the participant's answers to various interview questions, Combat sports have caused hard work, commitment, motivation to work more, responsibility, etc. in athletes in this field. Payam explained:

My sport and club had a set of rules that I had to follow. I was committed to my sport and even this sport increased my commitment and responsibility and I was used to this situation and later when I went to work, I kept the same responsibility to my job and I was much more committed to my co-worker because I was used to this situation. And I worked even harder than they expected.

Kianosh adds:



When the training comes to an end and it becomes difficult for you to continue, but that voice is all that says do it soon, finish it and...in my life and especially at work, the same thing has happened to me a lot and there "I told myself that if you did it well, I would work harder to make more money and be able to run my own business.

- *Increased motivation:* Some participants stated that they enjoy combat sports and this sport is considered sacred to them. Some of them also stated that doing combat sports motivates them to pursue the sport. Khabat reflected:

The first love of my life is kickboxing, and if they take it from me, my soul really dies. And if it is not a soul, it is not my body. I hope all young people all over the world express themselves towards sports, especially combat sports. I never regret that I chose this sport. I have always been proud and enjoyed it.

Mohsen says:

In my opinion, the martial arts club is very sacred and has been able to have a positive impact much more than other places. Because it is not just words. You learn everything empirically and the things you use in life and apply to you.

- *Discipline:* Combat sports, due to their nature, have always brought with them discipline. Research participants have experienced regularity, punctuality, waking up and going to bed early, prioritizing exercise, etc. through combat sports in life. Payam recalls: "My coach was very strict about absenteeism and coming to practice regularly, and I had to adapt to those rules, which affected my life," Ali claimed:

Muay Thai taught me a lot of discipline. Going to bed early, waking up early, etc. I did not observe this before, but I learned this from my sports and coach. In the pre-match training camps, we had to get up early in the morning to train, and we fall asleep very early at night due to the fatigue caused by heavy training.

5. Discussion

The present study examined the lived experiences of Iranian martial artists practicing kickboxing and muay Thai. The first finding from the present study was that those combat sports have improved and increased the various dimensions of the athletes' existential capacity. This finding was similar to the results of studies by Chen and Cheesman (2013) on mixed martial arts athletes and martial arts practice among high-risk youths (Harwood et al., 2017). In this context, Columbus and Rice (1998) have stated that it seems that participation in martial arts practice can help compensate for emotional deficiencies in other dimensions of athletes' lives. We might expect pain to teach empathy for the pain inflicted on others, and that mastering martial arts may lead to assertiveness, self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-esteem, resulting in less anxiety and aggression toward others (Martinkova et al., 2019). Dimson et al. (2016) studied young muay Thai athletes and found that muay Thai training helped to improve their self-esteem and emotional regulation. They may have suffered many defeats in competitions, but these defeats have made them more experienced and mature, and have improved their capacity for existence. It has given them courage, and this has had a positive effect on their lives, and it has helped them in various situations. Ring athletes are proud of themselves and their sport, whether they have won a bout or have become champions, or those who have lost or not competed at all. Combat sports have brought them pride, progress and good self-esteem.

Martial arts involvement is believed to provide positive learning opportunities for youth in general, as well as with regard to specific target groups. For example, a study among member countries of the European Physical Education Association indicated that in the majority of countries, martial arts are introduced during physical education classes in secondary schools, because it is believed that martial arts involvement can provide positive educational opportunities to pupils (Theeboom & Knop, 1999). Due to the fact that combat sports are a multidimensional sport and in addition to all the factors of physical fitness, mental factors and concentration also play an important role in their training, this sport has been able to affect the concentration and strength of athletes' mind and have a positive effect.



Studies regarding the effects of martial arts practice on youth show contrasting images. While some refer to enhanced personal and social opportunities for those that participate, others warn against increased levels of aggressiveness and antisocial behavior among its participants (Vertonghen & Theeboom, 2010). Lafuente et al.'s (2021) research did not support the idea that martial arts and combat sports (MA&CS) reduces or increases anger and aggression, as more and more robust scientific evidence is needed. Moore et al. (2020) conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis on the effects of martial arts training on aggression. Results showed that MA&CS training may have no effect or small positive or negative effect. Bu et al. (2010) showed conflicting results regarding anger in martial arts athletes, and the results of their research were different for different types of martial arts. Endresen and Olweus (2005) concluded that participation in combat sports leads to increased antisocial behavior in youth. However, in contrast to the above, the current study indicated that the effect of combat sports on anger control can be inferred. For the individuals studies at least, combat sports appear to have a special educational potential in shaping positive behavioral patterns and transmitting moral values that can help reduce aggression in society (Kotarska et al., 2019).

Finally, empirical research by Ustun and Tasgin (2020) that investigated the relationship between muay Thai experience and anger in university students in Turkey found that individuals with nine or more years of muay Thai experience showed significantly lower scores for introverted and suppressed anger than those with only 1–2 years, 3–4 years, and 5–6 years of muay Thai experience (Ustun & Tasgin, 2020). Also found that individuals with nine or more years of muay Thai experience showed significantly higher scores for anger control than those with only 1–2 years, 3–4 years, and 7–8 years of muay Thai experience. Contrary to unsupported speculation in the philosophical literature that martial arts training leads to mental instability and the promotion of violence in individuals (Dixon, 2015; Russell, 2014), results of several empirical studies suggest that muay Thai training may actually help to reduce anger and improve anger control.

People with different motivations have entered combat sports. Maybe people with the motivation of fighting, aggressiveness, conflict and such things have turned to this sport so that later they can fight better with the strength they have gained and the techniques they learn, but it is very interesting that the same people after going through in a short time, they completely forget this motivation. According to the findings of this research, the reason for this can be the discharge of negative energies and aggressive forces in the martial arts club, as well as finding self-confidence, lack of pride, chivalry, promotion and preservation of character, high resistance, etc. Young people with higher levels of resilience and self-efficacy are less likely to engage in aggressive behaviors or become victims of bullying (Greco, 2021). In any case, these results should be viewed with much caution, as they are not readily generalizable; however, they do reveal how for some athletes combat sports have a range of positive impacts on aggression.

Another important finding obtained in this study was the development of athletes' moral character. As Gartland et al. (2001) point out, many educators place great emphasis on discipline, respect, and spirituality. In this regard, Columbus and Rice (1988) also mention self-discipline or life transition, which is consistent with this part of the study. Cultivating morality is an integral part of many martial arts. Martial artists take pride in demonstrating high moral values, and morality is an integral part of their educational goals (Martinkova et al., 2019). Athletes in these kinds of sport have acquired many customs of behavior and associations and good social status and relationships through special martial arts exercises, club environment, coach, etc., and have literally lived with this sport. According to Görner et al. (2019), coaches can influence martial arts through training activities, as well as perceptive perception and health care, which in turn can lead to better athletic outcomes. Athletes must pay their respects upon entering the club and must pay their respects upon leaving. They should never disrespect the coach, their teammates, the training environment and even the training equipment during training, and for each training moment and each situation, a special type of respect has been defined that they have been required to observe and according to this process is often institutionalized in their behavior and lives. They now see themselves as trustworthy, respectable, majestic, social, and open-minded, all of which have given them a high status in society. It is noteworthy that the coaches of combat sports clubs as a source of inspiration and policy, is one of the main pillars of cultivating moral character in athletes and as a goal for the disciples, all the moral characteristics and customs that it has. It is modelled and copied by athletes. This finding is



consistent with the results of Fung and Lee (2018) research that showed that martial arts emphasize self-excellence and self-enhancing characteristics, such as self-cultivation, self-control, respect, benevolence, peace-seeking and appreciation of nature.

Achieving health is another important aspect of which many parts have been found in the results of previous research (including Fung & Lee, 2018; Gartland et al., 2001; Haksever et al., 2021) and are corroborated by the findings of this study. Examining the values, origins, and other aspects of humanity and society nurtured in martial arts adds to the knowledge about fostering health (Pedrini & Jennings, 2021). Human health status is characterized by physical, social, and mental dimensions, each of which is in a chain of positive and negative poles (Uher & Bukova, 2018). Treatment through martial arts can help mental health and psychological well-being of people. Participation in martial arts also promotes mental health (Wąsik & Wójcik, 2017). Physiological research by Rapkiewicz et al. (2018) that examined muay Thai training among women found that 13 weeks of muay Thai training resulted in increased cardiorespiratory fitness, and further physiological research by Thamyres Ciccotti Saraiva et al. (2021) that examined muay Thai training among overweight adolescents (n = 40) found that 16 weeks of muay Thai training resulted in decreased total body fat mass and increased total muscle mass. In other words, results from the studies by Rapkiewicz et al. (2018) and Thamyres Ciccotti Saraiva et al. (2021), demonstrate that muay Thai training provides individuals with an opportunity to accomplish generally recommended health and physical fitness goals, such as decreasing body fat mass, increasing total muscle mass, and increasing cardiorespiratory fitness.

Nonetheless, some scholars such as Russell (2014) and Dixon (2015) have argued that martial arts training is maladaptive, contributes to psychological illness, and provides a social harm, whereas other scholars such as Croom (2014) and Allen (2015) have argued that martial arts training is adaptive, contributes to psychological wellness, and provides a social benefit. Combat sports, in addition to physical health, which is reflected in almost all sports, have also been very effective in benefiting mental health. However, because the athlete's body is performing movements during the exercise, it may be injured. The most common problems for these athletes are bruises, fractures, and joint injuries (Zetaruk et al., 1998). One participant, Khabat, recalls, "Throughout my time in combat sports, I've experienced numerous injuries. However, each time I've recovered, I've eagerly returned to the sport. It has become an integral part of my life, and I've grown accustomed to it". Khabat's story shows that injuries can be one of the biggest challenges for combat sports athletes. However, with a positive attitude and constant effort, these obstacles can be overcome, and greater goals can be achieved. Based on the findings of this study, combat sports have been able to play its role in many areas of mental health, including, mental problems, negative energy, depression, fear and anxiety, lack of confidence, aggression, incompatibility with others, etc. In this case, doctors make connections between their experiences and progress in aspects related to mental health.

Another important finding of the present study was the improvement of athletes' lifestyles through active participation in combat sports. Physical education is an important factor in a healthy lifestyle, disease prevention, the formation of human values in leisure time and the creation of conditions for all-round harmonious growth (Hylchuk et al., 2017). They often do these exercises to improve their physical fitness and quality of life (Wąsik & Wójcik, 2017). Gartland et al. (2001) also referred to order in this finding. Moradi et al. (2020) also indicated that sports discipline is effective in motivating athletes to continue and commit to physical activity. Athletes reported having avoided unhealthy and negative people in outdoor environments due to associating with fitter and more wholesome people in the club, and they have separated their way of life from such people, and in the sports club environment, which is known as a healthy and safe environment. In line with their life goals, they have become more responsible and even outside the club, they have done their work more patiently, better and with more commitment. Combat sports have helped the athletes to have an unyielding spirit in all aspects of their lives and to do everything in the best possible way.

However, it remains difficult to determine if and to what extent the practice of a combat Sport can be accounted for the reported effects. The presumed effects cannot be attributed solely to mere sport participation, because other factors could have an influence as well. For example, the cause and effect relationship of combat sports practice as well as the self-selection bias remain critical issues. It has been argued that it is often too difficult to make general statements about the social-



psychological outcomes of sports participation, without taking several influential factors into consideration, such as the type of guidance, the structural qualities of the sport, the characteristics of the participants and the social context (Coalter, 2007; Patricksson, 1995; Shields & Bredemeier, 1995). However, future studies that control for a number of important influencing factors may provide a better understanding of the true nature of the socio-psychological consequences of martial arts practice.

One of the limitations of this research is the lack of women's opinions in the research, which may have influenced the collection of comprehensive information and results, and it is suggested that in future research, the experiences of female athletes in combat sports should be investigated. Future studies that control for a number of important influencing factors may provide a better understanding of the true nature of the socio-psychological consequences of martial arts practice.

Our findings were an emphasis on past research that has shown the role of combat sports in various aspects of life. Interviews with experienced people who were actively involved in combat sports were one of the strengths of this study, which made the findings more reliable. Overall, our findings, based on the athletes' narratives, explain their positive experiences in the social, moral and psychological dimensions. In this way, they have expressed the connection of these sports with the improvement of these dimensions from their point of view. The results of this research can be used in many studies of sports marketing, psychology, psychiatry, sociology, coaching of combat sports, etc. According to the topics discussed, the benefits of this sport can be used in the marketing of combat sports clubs. Combat sports may also be effective in reducing sociological problems such as mobility, destructiveness and vandalism, suicide, promiscuity, inappropriate lifestyle, decline of values and violence, and this research can open a new horizon in joint studies of sociologists, psychologists, sports managers and coaches. However, the mentioned cases should be considered with caution because any conclusions about the effects of these sports in these areas require further investigation. Finally, psychologists and psychiatrists can prescribe participation in combat sports to treat and solve the problems of their clients who have various psychological and mental problems such as lack of self-confidence, fear, anxiety, hopelessness, aggression, depression and hyperactivity. Therefore, it is recommended that for each of the mentioned cases and the role of martial arts in reducing them to be the subject of future research using both quantitative and qualitative methods.

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