# Exploring Youth Empowerment through Muaythai in Peninsular Malaysia

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## ABSTRACT

Organized sport is frequently positioned as a context for youth development, yet developmental benefits cannot be inferred from participation alone. This study explores how Muaythai is experienced and interpreted as a context for youth empowerment in Peninsular Malaysia, focusing on interactions among personal agency, social relationships, institutional opportunity, and participation constraints. Guided by Psychological Empowerment Theory and Positive Youth Development (PYD), an interpretivist qualitative case study design was used. Ten male participants were purposively recruited: two youth athletes aged 19 and 21, four coaches, three club or state association representatives, and one national association representative. Data were generated through face-to-face, semi structured interviews and supplementary participant observation and analyzed thematically using an inductive–deductive approach. Six interrelated themes were developed: intrinsic challenge, self-efficacy, and self-protection; social anchoring through family and training peers; institutional opportunity and grassroots enablement; structural and sociocultural constraints; discipline and life-skills transfer; and resilience, risk avoidance and moral identity. Findings suggest that Muaythai may become developmentally meaningful when physical challenge is embedded within disciplined practice, supportive relationships, regulated competition, and credible progression pathways. However, financial inequality, perceived inequity in opportunity, social stigma, and sport–academic tensions can restrict sustained participation. The study conceptualizes empowerment as an embedded and conditional process involving intrapersonal agency, relational support, institutional opportunity, and transfer beyond sport. Because only two participants provided first-person youth accounts, the findings should be interpreted as a multi-stakeholder account of the conditions surrounding youth empowerment rather than as representative of Malaysian youth athletes. The study contributes contextually grounded evidence from Malaysia and highlights practical implications for grassroots clubs, sport associations, coaches, and youth development practitioners.

**Keywords**: Youth empowerment; Muaythai; positive youth development; combat sport; Malaysia

## INTRODUCTION

Sport can provide young people with structured opportunities to acquire skills, form relationships, experience responsibility, and negotiate success and failure. Research on youth sport therefore extends beyond physical performance to consider psychological, social, and developmental processes. A systematic review by Eime et al. (2013) identified psychological and social benefits associated with sport participation among children and adolescents, while developmental approaches to youth sport emphasize that organized sport can provide settings in which competence, relationships, and life skills are cultivated. However, a central qualification runs through this literature: positive outcomes should not be assumed simply because a young person participates. The quality of relationships, coaching practices, organizational structures, and the meaning attached to sporting experiences influence whether participation becomes developmentally constructive (Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2005; Holt et al., 2017; Petitpas et al., 2005).

Combat sports provide a particularly demanding context in which to examine this distinction. They combine physical confrontation with codified rules, repetitive practice, hierarchical coaching relationships, and expectations of emotional and behavioural control. Although combat sports can be viewed externally through the language of aggression and injury, research on organized martial arts settings has also associated structured participation with self-regulation and psychosocial development (Lakes & Hoyt, 2004; Vertonghen & Theeboom, 2010). Rutten et al. (2007) similarly demonstrated that organized youth sport can be linked to prosocial and antisocial behaviour in ways that depend on the social and pedagogical environment. These findings make it necessary to distinguish regulated sporting aggression from the assumption that combat sport participation necessarily reproduces violence outside the sporting context.

Muaythai offers a relevant case for examining this tension. Vail (2014) describes the transformation of Muaythai from a martial tradition into a modern and globalized combat sport. In the present case, Muaythai is treated as a highly structured activity involving routine conditioning, technical training, controlled sparring, and competitive participation. Its social organization also involves coaches, training peers, clubs, state associations, and national governance. Consequently, the developmental significance of Muaythai cannot be reduced to the acquisition of fighting techniques. Participation is embedded in relationships and institutions that determine how physical challenge is interpreted, how rules are enforced, which opportunities are available, and whether young athletes can sustain participation alongside education and family expectations.

The study is situated in Peninsular Malaysia, where an important imbalance remains in the literature framing Muaythai. Recent studies have begun to examine psychosocial and wellbeing outcomes associated with Muay Thai, including self-esteem, body perception, and quality of life among adolescents (Saraiva et al., 2024) and quality of life and self-control among university-aged men (Şahin et al., 2025). Nevertheless, much of the wider Muaythai literature continues to emphasize performance, conditioning, injury, and physiological outcomes. Less is known about empowerment as a relational and institutional process: how motivation, social support, opportunity structures, participation constraints, and perceived developmental change interact within a Malaysian Muaythai ecosystem. This contextual gap matters because youth development processes are not socially neutral; the meanings of support, authority, family approval, educational responsibility, and opportunity are embedded in particular settings.

A second problem concerns causal overstatement in interpreting developmental outcomes. A qualitative case study with two youth athletes and eight adult stakeholders cannot establish that Muaythai causes discipline, resilience, moral character, or risk avoidance, nor that the same effects occur across all young participants. What such data can establish is how participants and stakeholders interpret developmental processes, which experiences they connect with empowerment, and which conditions they believe enable or restrict those processes. This distinction preserves the value of the empirical accounts while keeping claims proportionate to the study design.

Accordingly, this study examines Muaythai as a potential context for youth empowerment rather than as an intervention whose effects are assumed in advance. It addresses four interconnected questions: what factors encourage youth involvement in Muaythai; what challenges affect participation and its continuation; how Muaythai is perceived to contribute to youth character and personal development; and what institutional strategies may strengthen its developmental role. Psychological Empowerment Theory (Zimmerman, 1995) and Positive Youth Development (Lerner, 2005; Lerner et al., 2005) are used as complementary interpretive lenses to examine how personal agency, social relationships, institutional conditions, and developmental strengths interact within the case.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Muaythai and Combat Sport as Developmental Contexts

Developmental claims about sport require attention to the conditions under which sport is organized. Fraser-Thomas and Côté (2005) argue that youth sport programmes can be intentionally designed to support

positive development, while Petitpas et al. (2005) emphasize the importance of supportive adults, appropriate activities, and opportunities to build psychosocial competencies. Holt et al. (2017), drawing on a qualitative meta-study, further conceptualize PYD through sport as a process emerging from interactions among the young person, relationships, and the wider sporting environment. Taken together, these perspectives challenge a simple the assumption that participation equals development assumption. Sport is better understood as a context that can generate developmental opportunities, but whose consequences depend on programme quality and social organization.

This qualification is particularly relevant to combat sports. Physical intensity and controlled confrontation create repeated situations in which participants must manage fatigue, fear, aggression, tactical decision making, and interpersonal trust. Lakes and Hoyt (2004) associated school-based martial arts training with self-regulation, and Vertonghen and Theeboom (2010) reviewed social-psychological outcomes of martial arts practice among youth. Wacquant's (2004) sociological account of boxing also illustrates how the gym can operate as a disciplined social world rather than merely a site of physical violence. Jump (2017) similarly treats the boxing gym as a socially meaningful setting connected with change and community. Together, these sources support the analytical possibility that a combat sport gym can function as a social institution. They do not, however, justify treating all combat sport participation as beneficial.

Muaythai adds cultural and organizational dimensions to this discussion. Vail (2014) situates Muaythai within processes of modernization and globalization, underscoring that the contemporary sport is both culturally rooted and institutionally regulated. Recent intervention research has also begun to document psychosocial outcomes in specific Muay Thai populations. Saraiva et al. (2024), for example, examined self-esteem, body perception, and quality of life among adolescents with overweight or obesity, while Şahin et al. (2025) reported improvements in quality of life and self-control following a six-week programme among healthy male university students. These studies strengthen the case for examining Muaythai beyond physical performance, but they do not explain how empowerment is produced, negotiated, or constrained through relationships and opportunity structures. In practice, structured Muaythai requires compliance with training rules, technical discipline, coaching authority, and competitive norms. These features can create experiences through which young people encounter responsibility and constraint simultaneously. The critical question is therefore not whether Muaythai is intrinsically ‘good’ or ‘bad’ for youth, but how particular training environments organize physical challenge, relationships, regulation, and opportunities in ways that participants interpret as developmental or burdensome.

**Empowerment as a Relational and Contextual Process**

Zimmerman (1995) conceptualizes psychological empowerment as a dynamic process rather than a fixed personal trait. The framework distinguishes intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioural components. The intrapersonal component concerns perceived competence, self-efficacy, and control. The interactional component concerns critical understanding of the social environment, including knowledge of resources, opportunities, and constraints. The behavioural component concerns actions through which individuals participate and attempt to influence their circumstances. This framework is useful for the present study because it prevents empowerment from being reduced to confidence alone.

Applied to Muaythai, intrapersonal empowerment may be reflected in participants' interpretations of skill mastery, physical challenge, and self-protection. Yet an athlete who feels more capable can still be constrained by inadequate funding, restricted access to competition, or family opposition. The interactional dimension therefore becomes essential: empowerment involves understanding how the sporting environment is structured and whether resources can actually be accessed. Behavioural empowerment, in turn, is visible only when capacities are expressed in action, for example through sustained participation, disciplined routines, leadership, or the application of learned strategies beyond the gym.

This distinction has two analytical advantages. First, it shifts the explanation away from an exclusively individual model in which success or dropout is attributed to motivation. Second, it makes structural inequalities relevant to empowerment. A young athlete may be motivated and disciplined but still encounter

limited opportunities because a small club lacks resources or competitive access. In such cases, a deficit in opportunity should not be reinterpreted as a deficit in the young person. The framework therefore provides a basis for examining the relationship between personal agency and institutional conditions rather than privileging one over the other.

**Positive Youth Development Through Sport**

Positive Youth Development (PYD) offers a complementary strengths-based perspective. Rather than defining young people primarily through problems or risks, PYD views youth as possessing resources that can be developed within supportive environments (Lerner, 2005). The Five Cs model identifies competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring as interrelated dimensions of positive development, with contribution emerging when these capacities are used in relation to others and the wider community (Lerner et al., 2005).

The relevance of PYD to sport lies in the opportunities embedded in sporting practice. Competence may develop through technical, cognitive, and social learning. Confidence may be reinforced when participants experience mastery. Connection can be supported by relationships with peers and coaches. Character may be expressed through adherence to rules, respect, and responsibility, while caring may emerge through reciprocal concern within the sporting group. Importantly, the framework does not require that all five dimensions appear automatically in every sporting setting. Holt et al. (2017) emphasize the role of the developmental environment, and Fraser-Thomas and Côté (2005) similarly show why programme design matters.

For the present study, PYD is therefore treated as an interpretive vocabulary for examining perceived developmental strengths, not as an outcome measure. The study did not administer a Five Cs instrument and cannot establish measurable change in PYD dimensions. Instead, the framework helps organize participants' accounts of competence, confidence, relationships, discipline, empathy, and contribution while retaining the distinction between perceived experience and demonstrated causal effect.

**Motivation, Belonging, and Continued Participation**

Entry into sport and continued participation are related but analytically distinct. Self Determination Theory identifies competence, relatedness, and autonomy as core psychological needs relevant to motivated behaviour (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In the present study, these concepts help frame why young people may be attracted to physically demanding activities, technical mastery, self-protection, and social belonging. Cao and Lyu (2024) likewise connect motivational drivers and sense of belonging with persistence in martial arts practice. These perspectives imply that initial attraction may be strengthened or weakened by later experiences within the training environment.

Relationships are particularly important because Muaythai is not practiced in social isolation. Training requires partners, coaches, and repeated interaction. Supportive peers can normalize difficulty and provide belonging, while coaches can influence whether physical challenge is interpreted as disciplined learning or simply excessive pressure. This is consistent with the broader youth sport literature emphasizing supportive relationships as a condition of developmental experience (Holt et al., 2017; Petitpas et al., 2005).

Continued participation is also shaped by transition and attrition. Fraser-Thomas et al. (2007) examine dropout and prolonged engagement in adolescent competitive sport, and Zhang et al. (2024) review why students discontinue regular sport in late adolescence. This literature highlights that continued involvement cannot be explained by motivation alone. Demands may accumulate as young people progress in education or competition, making the availability of supportive structures increasingly important.

**life-skills transfer, Dual Careers, and Social Regulation**

One of the central developmental questions concerns transfer: whether capacities practiced in sport can be applied outside sport. Gould and Carson (2008) review life skills development through sport, while

Turnnidge et al. (2014) explicitly question whether transfer from sport to life occurs implicitly or requires deliberate support. Camiré et al. (2011) similarly examine coaching and the transfer of life skills in a community sport programme. These sources support a cautious formulation: sport can provide opportunities to develop transferable capacities, but transfer should not be assumed simply because a skill is practiced in a sporting setting.

For Muaythai, time discipline, emotional regulation, persistence, and respect for rules are plausible candidates for transfer because they are repeatedly practiced and socially reinforced. Yet the evidentiary standard remains important. A participant's account that training improved punctuality or helped manage academic stress supports an interpretation of perceived transfer; it does not demonstrate that all participants become more disciplined or resilient. A rigorous analysis therefore asks what participants say was transferred, how they describe the process, and which environmental conditions may have supported it.

The relationship between sport and education creates a particularly important test of transfer. Stambulova and Wylleman (2014) conceptualize dual career development as a process in which athletes negotiate sporting and educational transitions simultaneously. Jonker et al. (2009) highlight the role of metacognitive skills among talented youth athletes. Within the present case, academic demands can function both as a constraint and as a context in which time management skills are exercised. This duality is analytically significant: the same sporting commitment that encourages planning can also produce fatigue and role strain when demands exceed available resources.

### Institutional Opportunity, Stigma, and the Research Gap

Youth development in sport is also shaped by opportunity structures. Green (2005) emphasizes recruitment, retention, and transition within sport programmes, drawing attention to the organizational systems that determine whether athletes can progress. From an empowerment perspective, access to competition, talent development pathways, equipment, and credible coaching is not peripheral to development; it determines whether personal capability can be translated into participation and recognition.

Social legitimacy represents another institutional condition. Wang et al. (2025) examine stigma surrounding sports disciplines and its relationship with social identity and willingness to participate. In the present context, public interpretations of combat sport as violent or associated with gangsterism may affect youth indirectly by shaping parental approval and community support. This matters because younger athletes may depend on families for transport, fees, and permission to compete. Stigma is therefore not merely an attitudinal problem; it can become a material participation constraint.

The literature reviewed here supports a clear but bounded research gap. Existing studies provide conceptual and empirical reasons to expect that structured sport, martial arts, supportive coaching, and social belonging can be developmentally meaningful. They also show that attrition, dual career pressures, and organizational opportunity affect continued participation. What remains insufficiently explained is how these processes intersect in the Malaysian Muaythai ecosystem across youth, coaching, club, state, and national perspectives. The present study addresses that gap by treating empowerment as a multi-level process rather than as an individual outcome and by examining enabling and constraining conditions within the same analytical frame.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design and Context

The study employed a qualitative case study design informed by an interpretivist orientation. Qualitative case study was appropriate because the research sought an in depth understanding of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context rather than statistical generalization (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2018). The case concerned youth empowerment within Muaythai settings in Peninsular Malaysia. The study included active Muaythai clubs and training environments in Selangor, Perlis, Pulau Pinang, and Kedah, providing access to the geographic contexts represented in the study.

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The interpretivist orientation is important to the way findings are reported. Empowerment was not treated as an objectively measured effect of training. Instead, the study examined how youth athletes and adult stakeholders understood motivation, development, barriers, and institutional support within the Muaythai environment. The case is therefore bounded by the participating Muaythai settings and stakeholder perspectives and should not be read as representative of all Muaythai participants in Malaysia.

**Participants and Sampling**

Participants were selected through purposive sampling because the study required information rich individuals with direct experience of the Muaythai ecosystem (Patton, 2015). Participants represented three broad stakeholder groups: youth athletes, certified coaches, and club or association management. Ten male participants ultimately took part. Two were youth athletes aged 19 and 21; four were coaches; three represented club or state association management; and one represented the national association. Their reported Muaythai experience ranged from seven to 35 years.

This sample composition has direct implications for interpretation. Only two participants provided first person youth athlete accounts. The remaining eight participants described youth development from positions of coaching, management, and governance. These accounts are valuable for understanding the institutional ecology surrounding youth participation, but they are not interchangeable with youth voices. Accordingly, the findings distinguish athlete experiences from stakeholder interpretations where analytically necessary. The all male sample also means that the study does not represent the experiences of female Muaythai participants.

Sampling was guided by information richness and coverage across stakeholder roles rather than statistical representation. Data collection ceased when interviews and observations were providing sufficient repetition to support stable thematic patterns across the bounded case. Because only two youth athletes were included, this judgement should not be interpreted as saturation of youth experience as a distinct population. The study instead prioritizes analytical depth across the Muaythai ecosystem while distinguishing first-person youth accounts from adult stakeholder interpretations.

**Table 1. Participant Characteristics**

| ID | Category | Age | Years | Role |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| P1 | Youth athlete | 19 | 10 years | Athlete |
| P2 | Youth athlete | 21 | 7 years | Athlete |
| P3 | State association | 43 | 33 years | Chairperson |
| P4 | Club management | 38 | 20 years | Secretary |
| P5 | State association | 45 | 9 years | Deputy chairperson |
| P6 | Coach | 38 | 15 years | State coach |
| P7 | Coach | 36 | 25 years | Coach |
| P8 | Coach | 44 | 7 years | Club coach |
| P9 | Coach | 27 | 17 years | State coach |
| P10 | National association | 48 | 35 years | Association officer |

### Data Collection

Data were generated primarily through face-to-face semi structured in depth interviews lasting approximately 40 to 60 minutes. Interview protocols differed by stakeholder role while addressing common domains: background and involvement, motivations, challenges and retention, perceived developmental changes, coaching or organizational practices, and recommendations for strengthening Muaythai as a youth development platform. The semi structured format enabled comparable coverage across interviews while allowing probing of participant specific experiences.

Participant observation served as a supplementary contextual method within selected training environments. Field notes focused on training routines, physical intensity, coach athlete interaction, social dynamics, and non-verbal features of the training setting. Observation was used primarily to contextualize interview accounts and assess whether descriptions of discipline, regulation, and interaction were broadly consistent with the environments encountered, rather than as an independently sampled observational dataset. Because observation was supplementary and was not standardized across sites, its evidentiary role is treated cautiously.

Participants were informed of the study purpose, voluntary participation, confidentiality, audio recording, and their right to withdraw. Written informed consent was obtained. Identifying information was replaced with participant codes.

### Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Interview recordings were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis following the six phase procedure described by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and reporting. Thematic analysis provided the analytic framework for organizing and interpreting the dataset. Coding combined inductive attention to the empirical material with deductive attention to concepts from Psychological Empowerment Theory and PYD. These theories were treated as sensitizing frameworks rather than templates that determined the findings in advance.

During theme review, closely overlapping subthemes were consolidated into six higher order analytical themes. This consolidation reduced repetition while preserving the empirical content of the coding. The six themes reported below integrate findings on motivation, social support, institutional enablement, financial and sociocultural constraints, discipline and life-skills transfer, and resilience and moral development.

Trustworthiness was supported through source triangulation across athletes, coaches, club or state administrators, and a national association representative, alongside participant observation (Denzin, 2012). The researcher occupied an insider position within the Muaythai environment, which supported contextual understanding while also creating a risk that prior familiarity could influence interpretation. Reflexivity therefore focused on examining how this familiarity might shape the reading of the data, keeping interpretive claims close to participant quotations and observational context, distinguishing youth accounts from stakeholder interpretations, and avoiding causal language that exceeded the design.

## FINDINGS

The thematic analysis generated six interrelated themes: (1) intrinsic challenge, self-efficacy, and self-protection; (2) social anchoring through family and training peers; (3) institutional opportunity and grassroots enablement; (4) structural and sociocultural constraints; (5) discipline and life-skills transfer; and (6) resilience, risk avoidance and moral identity. Collectively, the themes indicate that empowerment was not understood as a direct consequence of physical participation. Instead, developmental meaning was produced through the interaction of individual motivation, relationships, institutional structures, repeated practice, and the capacity to navigate constraints.

**Theme 1: Intrinsic Challenge, self-efficacy and self-protection**

The first theme concerned the attraction of physically demanding activity and the perceived development of personal capability. P1, a 19 year-old athlete, described an early preference for difficult and physically intense activities:

"I was attracted to Muaythai because, since I was young, I have always liked doing challenging and physically demanding activities."

For this participant, the sport matched an existing orientation toward physical challenge rather than creating it from nothing. This distinction matters because participation may partly reflect self-selection: young people who are already attracted to demanding activity may be more likely to enter and remain in Muaythai.

P2 entered through a different pathway. His initial exposure came through following a cousin to training, but observation developed into personal interest:

"At first, I only followed my cousin to watch people train. Over time, I saw that Muaythai had a different attraction. It was more dynamic and aggressive, but very disciplined. From there I wanted to try, and after I tried it, I stayed."

His account shows an interaction between social access and intrinsic attraction. The cousin created the opportunity to encounter the sport, while the combination of physical intensity and structured discipline sustained interest.

self-protection was also presented as a meaningful motive. P1 associated martial arts participation with reducing vulnerability to bullying, while P9, a coach, interpreted confidence and self-protection as common reasons for youth participation:

"Most young people are looking for a platform to build confidence and protect themselves from external threats. This sport is not only about learning how to punch or kick; it is also a place to build discipline, character, and resilience."

This account positions self-protection as more than the acquisition of physical defensive skills. The perceived ability to protect oneself was closely connected to confidence, discipline, and a stronger sense of personal capability. Within this theme, physical competence therefore carried a broader developmental meaning: learning to respond to potential threats was associated with greater self-assurance and perceived control over challenging situations. self-protection, in this sense, formed part of a wider process of developing personal capability rather than functioning solely as a practical reason for learning combat techniques.

The theme therefore captures more than fitness motivation. Participants linked physical challenge with mastery and the possibility of greater control over threatening or demanding situations. At the same time, the data do not establish that all youth enter Muaythai for empowerment. The two direct athlete accounts show different entry pathways, reinforcing the need to treat motivation as heterogeneous rather than singular.

**Theme 2: Social Anchoring Through Family and Training Peers**

The second theme shows that youth involvement in Muaythai was also shaped by social relationships that connected them to the sport, the training environment, and sources of support. Family members, peers, and coaches played different roles in facilitating entry, fostering a sense of belonging, and creating a regulated training environment.

P2's account, introduced in Theme 1, also illustrates the relational route into participation: following a cousin to training created the initial opportunity to encounter Muaythai. His continued involvement, however, developed through his own interest in the sport's combination of physical intensity and structured

discipline. The case therefore shows how social access and personal motivation can operate together without treating family influence as the sole explanation for participation.

Within the training environment, relationships with training peers were built around trust, self-control, and shared responsibility. P7 explained that regulating ego was an important part of sparring:

"During daily sparring, the first thing the coach teaches is that everyone has to put their ego aside. Once the ego is under control, we can avoid unwanted fights or injuries and make sure their emotional and mental welfare is protected in a safe training environment."

This account shows that physical interaction in Muaythai was not based on uncontrolled domination. Participants were expected to recognise the limits of their training partners, regulate the intensity of their actions, and protect one another from unnecessary harm. Training partners therefore functioned both as sources of physical challenge and as individuals whose safety had to be respected.

The emphasis on "putting ego aside" also reflects particular behavioural norms within the training environment. Physical aggression was acceptable within the controlled boundaries of training, whereas actions driven by ego or the intention to cause harm were positioned as inconsistent with legitimate practice. The gym therefore operated as a social environment that required interpersonal discipline alongside physical competence.

Family relationships also influenced continued participation. Support could take the form of approval, encouragement, financial assistance, transportation, or permission to participate in training and competition. The importance of this support became particularly visible when it was reduced or withdrawn. P9 described how concerns about safety could lead parents to reconsider their support:

"Even though we have explained that the amateur format is now very safe, with complete protective equipment such as head, elbow and body protection, prejudice toward the 'violent' element of the sport still exists among some guardians. Parents begin to withdraw their support because they are worried about their children's safety, especially when competitions are approaching."

This experience indicates that family support may change across different stages of participation. Acceptance of regular training may weaken when involvement progresses toward competition and perceived risk becomes more prominent. Individual motivation alone may therefore be insufficient to sustain participation when support from the immediate social environment declines.

Overall, this theme demonstrates the importance of the social dimension of youth participation in Muaythai. Family and peer relationships can provide access to the sport, while a training culture based on trust, self-control, and shared responsibility can make participation more meaningful and manageable. At the same time, changes in family support show that continued involvement is also shaped by how Muaythai is perceived and accepted within young people's immediate social environment.

**Theme 3: Institutional Opportunity and Grassroots Enablement**

Participants emphasized that talent and motivation alone were insufficient when young athletes lacked clear pathways for progression. P3, representing a state association, described a grassroots talent initiative:

"We started this initiative through a talent programme at grassroots level to develop young people with potential."

Such programmes allow talent emerging from local clubs to be identified and connected to more formal development structures. For athletes with limited exposure to wider sporting networks, talent identification creates opportunities for their abilities to be seen and recognised.

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Beyond talent identification, competition provides an important setting for athletes to apply skills developed through training. It exposes them to competitive pressure, emotional regulation, and opportunities to assess their own progression. However, this process depends on clear governance. P10, representing the national association, explained:

"PMM is responsible for supervising, monitoring, and ensuring that the governance of this sport operates according to proper constitutional principles from the youth level onward."

This governance framework distinguishes organised Muaythai from uncontrolled physical confrontation. Protective equipment, qualified officials, and formal competition procedures help manage physical risk and ensure that competition operates within established rules.

However, the existence of programmes and competitions does not necessarily guarantee equal access. P4 raised concerns about opportunities for athletes from smaller clubs:

"The higher management needs to give athletes from small club's opportunities to compete at higher levels. There should not be favouritism in providing opportunities. We need to give new clubs a fair chance so that more high quality Muaythai clubs can develop in Malaysia... It should not be only the established clubs or clubs with many well-known athletes being selected, while ordinary clubs are looked down upon or cut off from outside competitions."

This account shows that the issue is not only whether development pathways exist, but also who is able to access them. If competitive and developmental opportunities are concentrated among established clubs, athletes from smaller clubs may struggle to demonstrate their abilities despite having comparable commitment and potential.

Overall, this theme shows that youth development in Muaythai is shaped by the interaction between grassroots clubs, talent development programmes, competition, and association governance. These structures can support progression when they provide clear and regulated pathways, but their developmental value also depends on whether access is distributed fairly.

**Theme 4: Structural and Sociocultural Constraints**

Participants identified financial inequality, perceived inequity in opportunity, social stigma, and academic pressure as constraints on youth participation. P2 described the vulnerability of small grassroots gyms:

"I really hope KBS and PMM will go to the ground and see the potential of small grassroots gyms. Many village youths have great talent but are held back by funding. There should be equipment subsidies or annual grants for gyms that actively train young people."

This account shifts the explanation for limited progression away from motivation alone. A committed athlete may still be unable to access equipment, travel, or competition when the surrounding club lacks resources.

Perceived unfairness in competitive opportunity formed a related concern. P4 argued:

"The management needs to give athletes from small clubs opportunities to compete at a higher level. There should not be favouritism. New clubs should receive fair opportunities ... rather than only choosing established clubs with many well-known athletes while ordinary clubs are cut off from outside competitions."

Whether or not this perception reflects the entire system, it is analytically significant because empowerment depends partly on the belief that effort can lead to opportunity. When participants perceive selection as opaque or unequal, confidence in institutional pathways can be weakened.

Social stigma represented another layer of constraint. P7 described the need for club management to repeatedly explain the sport to parents and the wider community:

"Muaythai is not a gangster sport; it is a sport of self-discipline."

Such stigma was connected with parental concern about safety and with the possibility that families withdraw support as athletes become more serious about competition. The consequence is not merely reputational. Because young athletes may rely on families for emotional and material support, negative community interpretations can become direct participation barriers.

Academic demands created a fourth form of constraint. P2 explained the physical cost of training alongside university study:

"Sometimes I am very tired after training at night, and the next morning I do not even have the energy to get up for class."

This tension can be understood as a dual career dilemma. Importantly, the account prevents an overly celebratory interpretation of discipline. Intensive training can encourage planning, but it can also produce fatigue that undermines educational functioning. The developmental value of challenge therefore depends on whether demands remain manageable and whether athletes receive sufficient support.

Taken together, the theme demonstrates that empowerment is conditional. Young people can experience competence and commitment while simultaneously confronting constraints that originate outside the self. A psychologically empowering environment must therefore be evaluated not only by what it asks young people to endure, but by whether institutions distribute resources and opportunities in ways that allow effort to remain meaningful.

**Theme 5: Discipline and life-skills transfer**

The fifth theme concerned the perceived transfer of disciplined practice beyond the gym. Athletes described punctuality, scheduling, and adherence to routine as learned behaviours that became relevant to education and everyday life. P1 stated,

"Muaythai taught me the importance of being punctual and always arriving at training on time."

P2 expressed a similar connection:

"It taught me discipline, not to be late for class and not to be late for training."

These accounts are particularly valuable because they describe change in domains beyond technical performance.

P1 also explained how training and study were deliberately compartmentalized:

"I divide my time; during the day and afternoon I train in Muaythai, and at night I study and revise."

The significance of this account is not that Muaythai automatically produces academic competence. Rather, the demands of maintaining both activities required the participant to construct a routine that could accommodate competing responsibilities.

The theme therefore highlights transfer as a process of application. Sporting discipline acquires broader developmental value only when participants use it to organize behaviour elsewhere. This distinction is consistent with life skills research cautioning against assuming that skills automatically move from sport to non-sport settings (Gould & Carson, 2008; Turnnidge et al., 2014). The findings provide participant level examples of perceived transfer, but they cannot determine how durable or generalizable such changes are. The theme also contains a productive contradiction. Academic demands appeared in Theme 4 as a source of

fatigue and possible dropout, yet education appears here as a domain in which disciplined scheduling is practiced. This suggests that demanding contexts can be simultaneously developmental and burdensome. Whether they produce growth or withdrawal may depend on the balance between demands and resources rather than on the presence of challenge alone.

**Theme 6: Resilience, Risk Avoidance and Moral Identity**

The final theme concerned how participants interpreted repeated exposure to difficulty. P2 used the logic of competition to describe persistence:

"The philosophy I always hold is: no matter how many times you fall or get hit, you have to get back up before the referee finishes the count. I apply that mentality to academics. If I can endure being hit, I can handle challenges on paper."

The statement shows an explicit act of meaning-making in which a sporting experience becomes a metaphor for non-sport adversity. It is therefore stronger evidence of perceived transfer than a general claim that difficult training builds resilience.

Coaches also associated structured training with reduced opportunity for unstructured risk behaviour. P7 stated:

"The daily routine of a Muaythai athlete is very full. Our young people do not have the time or energy to wander around and get involved with gangs outside the ring."

This interpretation should be treated cautiously. The study did not measure delinquency before and after participation, and the statement comes from an adult stakeholder. It therefore cannot establish risk reduction as an effect. What it does reveal is how coaches conceptualize the gym: as a structured social environment that organizes time, relationships, and goals in ways they perceive as protective.

Moral identity was connected with the regulation of aggression. P7's earlier emphasis on 'putting ego aside' suggests that technical ability was not considered sufficient for legitimate participation. P3 similarly described disciplined combat sport as capable of developing identity and professionalism. The central paradox is therefore not that aggression disappears, but that physical aggression is bounded by sporting rules and moral expectations. Participants are expected to know when force is appropriate, when restraint is required, and how respect for coaches, training partners, and opponents regulates behaviour.

The theme contributes a more precise interpretation of character development. Rather than claiming that Muaythai transforms aggressive individuals into moral citizens, the data suggest that participants and stakeholders attach moral meaning to practices of restraint, respect, persistence, and responsibility. These meanings may support identity development, but their long-term effects require evidence beyond the present case.

## DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that youth empowerment through Muaythai is best understood as an embedded and conditional process rather than an automatic effect of combat sport participation. Individual motivation mattered, but it operated within relationships and opportunity structures. Physical challenge could support perceived competence, but the significance of that competence depended on how training was regulated, how peers and coaches interacted, whether families supported participation, and whether institutions provided credible opportunities for progression. At the same time, financial inequality, social stigma, perceived unfairness, and academic demands could interrupt the translation of motivation into continued involvement.

This interpretation aligns with the wider sport development literature while sharpening its implications for the Muaythai case. Fraser-Thomas and Côté (2005), Petitpas et al. (2005), and Holt et al. (2017) all point

toward the importance of developmental environments rather than participation alone. Recent Muay Thai intervention studies have also reported psychosocial or wellbeing improvements in particular populations (Saraiva et al., 2024; Şahin et al., 2025). The present study complements that outcome-oriented evidence by identifying the relational, institutional, and structural conditions through which participants and stakeholders understand development.

The same environment can contain enabling and constraining processes simultaneously. A gym may provide belonging and disciplined routines while athletes remain excluded from higher level opportunities because of resource inequalities. Training may strengthen time management while also producing fatigue that competes with academic responsibilities. The developmental question is therefore not whether Muaythai is demanding, but whether demands are accompanied by resources, relationships, and opportunities that make adaptation possible.

**From Personal Mastery to Embedded Empowerment**

The first theoretical contribution concerns the relationship between personal mastery and context. The athlete accounts support the intrapersonal component of Zimmerman's (1995) framework insofar as participants connected technical mastery, physical challenge, and self-protection with competence and perceived control. These experiences also map onto PYD dimensions of competence and confidence (Lerner, 2005; Lerner et al., 2005). Yet the data show why neither framework should be interpreted at an exclusively individual level.

P2's route into Muaythai depended on a family connection, while continued participation was supported by training relationships and constrained by academic fatigue. P1's sense of discipline developed within a structured routine. Institutional actors created talent programmes and regulated competitions, but other participants perceived uneven funding and opportunity. In other words, self-efficacy was embedded in a social system. An athlete may feel capable yet remain unable to progress if the opportunity structure is closed.

This leads to a more critical interpretation of empowerment. Empowerment should not be inferred from willingness to endure hardship. The ability to tolerate difficult training may reflect persistence, but an empowering environment should also expand meaningful choice and access to opportunity. Where athletes are expected to overcome chronic underfunding or perceived institutional unfairness through personal resilience alone, the language of empowerment risks individualizing structural problems. Zimmerman's interactional component is particularly important here because it allows critical awareness of resources and power to remain part of empowerment rather than treating external constraints as background noise.

The study therefore supports an embedded empowerment perspective consisting of four interacting dimensions: intrapersonal agency, relational support, institutional opportunity, and transfer beyond sport. The four dimensions are not stages and need not occur in a fixed sequence. They identify levels at which empowerment can be enabled or constrained. This interpretation develops the integration of Zimmerman and PYD while avoiding the stronger claim that the two frameworks have been 'validated' by a small qualitative case study.

**Relational Regulation and the Meaning of a Safe Training Environment**

The second contribution concerns the relational organization of combat sport. The peer environment described by participants was not simply supportive in an affective sense. It was regulatory. Controlled sparring required athletes to challenge one another physically while limiting ego and avoiding unnecessary harm. This gives connection a distinctive meaning within Muaythai: belonging is built through reciprocal responsibility under conditions of controlled risk.

This interpretation is consistent with the broader argument that youth sport development depends on supportive adults and social environments (Holt et al., 2017; Petitpas et al., 2005). It also helps explain why combat sport cannot be understood through visible physical aggression alone. The normative structure of the

gym rules, coaching authority, partner responsibility, and expectations of restraint determines whether physical intensity becomes organized learning or simply uncontrolled exposure to risk.

The concept of a safe environment should therefore not be equated with an absence of physical difficulty. In this case, safety was described as regulated challenge: participants could experience intense training and sparring within boundaries set by coaches and sporting rules. The developmental function lies in the combination of challenge and containment. If regulation weakens, the same physical intensity could plausibly become harmful rather than developmental. This conditionality should be central to practice and policy claims about combat sport.

**life-skills transfer as an Interpretive Bridge**

A third contribution concerns the transfer of skills from sport to everyday life. The strongest evidence in the dataset comes from direct athlete accounts linking punctuality, scheduling, and persistence with study and daily routines. These accounts are consistent with Gould and Carson (2008), Camiré et al. (2011), and Turnnidge et al. (2014), who treat life-skills transfer as an important but non-automatic process.

The findings suggest that transfer occurs through interpretation as well as repetition. P2 did not simply experience being knocked down in training; he interpreted ‘getting back up’ as a principle that could be used when facing academic difficulty. P1 did not merely attend training on time; he described organizing study around the discipline required by his sporting routine. This indicates that the developmental significance of sport may lie partly in the meanings young people build around repeated experiences.

At the same time, the study cannot determine whether these changes are stable, whether they precede sport participation, or whether they occur among young people who later drop out. The possibility of selection effects is particularly important. Individuals who already value discipline or challenge may be more likely to persist in Muaythai. The qualitative accounts therefore support perceived transfer and meaning-making, not a causal claim that Muaythai produces these traits.

**Constraint, Attrition, and the Limits of Resilience Narratives**

The fourth contribution is a critical one: resilience should not be used to normalize preventable constraints. A narrow resilience narrative may privilege mental toughness and perseverance, but the findings also document financial barriers, unequal opportunity, stigma, and academic strain. These conditions show why prolonged participation cannot be explained only by an athlete's willingness to persist.

This interpretation is consistent with research on prolonged engagement and dropout in youth sport (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2007; Zhang et al., 2024) and with Green's (2005) emphasis on organizational systems supporting recruitment, retention, and transition. For the Muaythai case, persistence depends partly on whether young athletes can afford equipment and travel, access fair competitive opportunities, obtain family support, and manage educational responsibilities. Resilience may help athletes respond to difficulty, but it cannot replace institutional support.

The dual career findings illustrate this particularly well. Sport and education are not competing domains simply because athletes lack discipline. Stambulova and Wylleman (2014) show that dual career development involves transitions that require coordination and support. P2's account of exhaustion after night training indicates that there is a material limit to the developmental narrative of 'working harder.' The implication is not that training should be made effortless, but that organizations should recognize capacity, recovery, and educational obligations as legitimate parts of athlete development.

**Positive Youth Development Without Automaticity**

The findings reflect several PYD dimensions, but they also demonstrate why PYD should not be applied as a checklist. Technical learning and time management align with competence; perceived mastery with confidence; peer and family support with connection; restraint and respect with character; and reciprocal

protection in training with caring. Contribution is less directly evidenced in the two youth athlete accounts, although adult stakeholders described pathways through which experienced athletes could support younger participants and the broader community.

The distinction is important. A strong PYD interpretation can move too quickly from evidence of discipline or respect to the conclusion that all Five Cs and contribution have been achieved. The present analysis adopts a more conservative position. The data show experiences that can be interpreted through PYD, but they do not measure each C systematically and do not establish a developmental sequence from Five Cs to contribution. This more cautious formulation strengthens rather than weakens the theoretical contribution because it preserves alignment between claims and evidence.

The present case therefore supports using PYD as a sensitizing framework for understanding how young people and stakeholders make sense of sporting development. It also reinforces Holt et al.'s (2017) emphasis on context: strengths emerge through interactions among the young person, relationships, and the sport environment. In Muaythai, this interaction includes not only coaching and peers but also family legitimacy, grassroots resources, competition structures, and educational demands.

**Implications for Malaysian Youth Development and Sport Practice**

The findings suggest several implications for organizations seeking to use Muaythai as a youth development context. First, developmental objectives should be made explicit within coaching rather than assumed to arise from hard training. Coaches can connect discipline, emotional regulation, and responsibility with situations outside the gym through reflection and deliberate discussion. This is consistent with the life skills literature emphasizing that transfer may require intentional support (Gould & Carson, 2008; Turnnidge et al., 2014).

Second, grassroots clubs should be recognized as developmental environments as well as athlete production sites. Small clubs can provide routine, belonging, and mentorship, yet the findings show that they may struggle with equipment and competition costs. Funding criteria that consider youth development activity, accessibility, and sustained grassroots engagement could reduce the risk that resources flow only toward already established organizations.

Third, selection and competition pathways should be transparent. The perception of favoritism reported by P4 may itself damage motivation even if administrators view decisions differently. Clear eligibility criteria, communication of selection decisions, and wider talent identification opportunities can strengthen trust in the opportunity structure. In empowerment terms, young athletes need credible evidence that effort and competence can lead to meaningful participation.

Fourth, clubs and associations should communicate systematically with parents and communities about regulation, safety procedures, and the distinction between controlled sporting aggression and violence. The findings suggest that stigma becomes consequential when it affects family support. Community engagement is therefore part of participation infrastructure rather than a purely promotional exercise.

Fifth, sport academic coordination should be treated as a developmental responsibility. Flexible training expectations during examination periods, communication with educational institutions where feasible, and realistic attention to recovery can help athletes maintain both commitments. Such flexibility does not reduce standards; it recognizes that continued participation requires adaptive management of competing roles.

Finally, a physically demanding gym should also be relationally accessible. Participants' descriptions of peer responsibility and coach involvement suggest that psychological safety is compatible with demanding training. A development-oriented club should therefore maintain clear behavioural rules, accessible adult guidance, and mechanisms for young athletes to raise concerns without being interpreted as lacking toughness.

# CONCLUSION

This study examined Muaythai as a context for youth empowerment in Peninsular Malaysia through the perspectives of two youth athletes and eight adult stakeholders across coaching, club, state, and national levels. The findings indicate that developmental meaning was associated with six interrelated processes: physical challenge and perceived self-efficacy; social anchoring; institutional opportunity; the negotiation of structural and sociocultural constraints; perceived transfer of discipline and life skills; and the construction of resilience and moral identity.

The central conclusion is not that combat sport participation automatically produces positive youth development. Rather, Muaythai may become developmentally meaningful when demanding practice is embedded within supportive relationships, regulated environments, credible opportunities, and reflective transfer beyond sport. The same ecosystem can also constrain development when resources are unequal, opportunities are perceived as unfair, stigma weakens family support, or training demands conflict with education.

Integrating Psychological Empowerment Theory and PYD therefore supports an embedded view of youth development. Agency matters, but agency is exercised within relationships and institutions. Confidence matters, but it does not remove structural barriers. Resilience matters, but it should not be used to normalize preventable inequality or excessive demands. For youth development practice, the most productive question is consequently not whether Muaythai is inherently empowering, but under what social, relational, and institutional conditions its experiences can be translated into development that young people can sustain beyond the ring.

### Ethical Approval

Formal ethical approval was not required for this study. All participants provided written informed consent, and the principles of voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity were upheld throughout the research process.

### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

### Data Availability

The qualitative data are not publicly available because interview transcripts and field materials contain potentially identifiable contextual information and are subject to participant confidentiality commitments.

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