



Martial Arts for Human Security and Empowerment: A Qualitative Study on the Benefits of Pencak Silat

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Abstract. Health promotion and community empowerment require not only structural reforms but also the integration of local wisdom rooted in cultural heritage. Pencak silat, a traditional Indonesian martial art recognized by UNESCO as an intangible cultural heritage, offers holistic benefits that go beyond mere physical exercise. This study aims to explore the contribution of pencak silat in enhancing health, instilling discipline, and shaping character, thereby demonstrating its potential for integration into promotive and preventive public health strategies. This qualitative study was conducted through in-depth interviews and participatory observations with pencak silat practitioners in Madiun, Indonesia. The total participants in in-depth interview are 25 people from 4 major martial art school and The Indonesian Pencak Silat Association. Data were thematically analyzed. The analysis identified four interrelated qualitative themes: (1) physical vitality and preventive health benefits; (2) character formation and psychological resilience; (3) social cohesion and community empowerment; (4) cultural identity and human security. These results indicate that pencak silat contributes not only to physical health improvement but also to character development and individual mental well-being. Practically, the findings suggest that pencak silat can be leveraged as a culturally grounded platform for promotive and preventive interventions, including community-based physical and mental health programs, value-based youth education, and initiatives aimed at strengthening social cohesion and resilience. The integration of traditional martial arts such as pencak silat into health, education, and community development programs holds potential to support holistic, sustainable, and culturally grounded promotive and preventive mental health strategies.

Keywords: community empowerment, health promotion, local wisdom, mental health, pencak silat

1 Introduction

Human security extends the concept of safety beyond the absence of immediate threats, emphasizing the broader conditions that enable individuals and communities to live with dignity, health, and inclusion. It underscores the importance of creating environments where people can lead meaningful lives free from chronic vulnerabilities and structural insecurities (UNDP, 2022). Contemporary discourse on human security highlights that resilience is rooted in social cohesion, equitable access to health care, and the active agency of communities in shaping their own futures (UNDP, 2022). Within this framework, human security is closely aligned with the biopsychosocial model of health, which conceptualizes well-being as the dynamic interaction of physical, psychological, and social dimensions rather than solely biomedical outcomes. Culturally practices that promote physical wellbeing, psychological resilience, and social connectedness serve as vital pathways for empowerment, as they simultaneously reinforce multiple dimensions of human wellbeing (Kruahong et al., 2023; WHO, 2025a).

In health promotion, culturally grounded and community-led interventions are increasingly recognized as essential, as they enhance the relevance, acceptance, and long-term sustainability of programs compared to top-down approaches (Lev & Ron, 2023; Singh et al., 2023). Community institutions that integrate everyday practices with moral education and mutual support hold particular value for preventive and promotive health efforts, as they activate existing networks of trust and local wisdom (WHO, 2025b). From a theoretical perspective, such institutions can be understood through community empowerment theory, which emphasizes participation, collective efficacy, and the strengthening of social capital as core mechanisms for improving population health. Among such practices, martial arts systems exemplify how embodied cultural traditions can merge structured physical training with lessons in character development and social responsibility—addressing the biological, psychological, and social dimensions of health in an integrated manner (Spring & Veasey, 2023).

Empirical evidence from diverse martial traditions supports these connections. Recent longitudinal and experimental studies demonstrate that consistent martial-arts training can enhance body composition, cardiopulmonary fitness, and key indicators of physiological resilience among both students and athletes (Liu & Danaa, 2025). Complementary qualitative and mixed-methods research further highlights the psychosocial benefits of martial practice, including reductions in anxiety, improved emotional regulation, strengthened self-efficacy, and overall increases in wellbeing. Together, these findings suggest that martial arts may function as an accessible and culturally adaptable approach to promoting mental health and preventive wellbeing (Spring & Veasey, 2023; Veasey et al., 2024). Within martial arts studies, these findings have contributed to a shift away from viewing martial arts solely as competitive or combative practices, toward understanding them as embodied pedagogies that transmit values, identities, and forms of self-regulation.

Focusing on *pencak silat*, recent reviews have synthesized evidence showing that this traditional martial art enhances not only physical abilities such as agility, strength, and coordination, but also cognitive–affective skills including resilience, tactical awareness, and emotional control. These findings position *pencak silat* as a holistic

form of self-development rather than merely a competitive sport (Nugroho et al., 2024). Sport-science and applied studies further report measurable gains in physical fitness and sport-specific performance—such as improved reaction time and blocking speed—demonstrating that targeted training methods like shadow-fighting and plyometric exercises can produce rapid, observable improvements in neuromotor function (Hasanuddin, 2025). Moreover, research on unique training practices, such as night-time sessions, has documented enhancements in aerobic capacity and other physiological markers among practitioners, highlighting the potential of *pencak silat* as a culturally resonant avenue for community health promotion (Hambali et al., 2024). These studies position *pencak silat* as a holistic practice that aligns closely with the biopsychosocial and life-course approaches increasingly emphasized in contemporary public health frameworks.

Importantly, the internal pedagogy of *pencak silat* often conceptualized as *olah raga* (training the body), *olah rasa* (training the emotions), and *olah pikir* (training the mind), aligns closely with the biopsychosocial model that underpins contemporary public health frameworks. This alignment forms a natural bridge between cultural practice and formal health objectives (Nugroho et al., 2024). From this perspective, *pencak silat* presents three practical pathways for integration: (1) physical training that supports the prevention of non-communicable diseases, (2) emotional and mental training that enhances stress management and psychological resilience, and (3) social participation through *perguruan* (silat schools) that fosters social capital, mutual support, and collective efficacy (Nugroho et al., 2024; Veasey et al., 2024). Because these pathways operate in tandem and are deeply rooted in local cultural meanings, *pencak silat* serves as a culturally legitimate and sustainable vehicle for promotive and preventive health interventions grounded in community ownership (Lev & Ron, 2023).

Despite these converging strands of evidence, existing literature still lacks in-depth qualitative accounts that explore how practitioners *experience* and *interpret* the benefits of *pencak silat* in their everyday lives, as well as how community mechanisms such as mentorship, ritual, and leadership translate embodied practice into broader forms of empowerment (Nugroho et al., 2024; Veasey et al., 2024). To date, most empirical studies have focused on athletic indicators or short-term outcomes, leaving underexamined the longer-term and culturally mediated processes through which *pencak silat* may contribute to human security and community resilience at the local level (Moore et al., 2023; Nugroho et al., 2024). Most prior studies privilege measurable athletic or psychological outcomes, while the culturally mediated processes linking martial arts practice to community resilience and health promotion remain underexplored. Addressing this gap, this study aims to investigate the multifaceted benefits of *pencak silat* through the lived experiences of practitioners in Madiun, Indonesia, with particular attention to how embodied training, moral pedagogy, and community networks intersect to shape health, discipline, and empowerment.

2 Materials and Method

2.1 Study design

This study used a qualitative, phenomenological approach to explore how pencak silat practitioners experience and make meaning of the practice in relation to health, character, and community empowerment. The phenomenological approach was selected to capture participants' lived experiences and subjective meanings rather than to test pre-defined hypotheses. This design is theoretically aligned with the study's focus on embodied practice and culturally grounded meanings, allowing an in-depth exploration of how physical training, moral pedagogy, and social interaction are perceived by practitioners. Study was conducted in Madiun, East Java, Indonesia, a region recognized for its strong *pencak silat* traditions and active *perguruan* (silat schools). Fieldwork was carried out over a six-month period (April–September 2025), enabling prolonged engagement and repeated observation within the silat community.

2.2 Participants

Participants for in-depth interviews were purposively sampled to capture diversity in role, experience, and perspective. A total of 25 participants took part in the in-depth interviews; they were recruited from four major *pencak silat* schools and from the Indonesian Pencak Silat Association (IPSI). Participants included students (n=4), trainers (n=4), general leaders (n=4), branch administrators (n=4), alumni (n=4), and elders (n=4).

The inclusion criteria were explicitly defined as: (1) active engagement in pencak silat practice for a minimum of six months, ensuring sufficient exposure to training and organizational culture; (2) age ≥ 16 years; and (3) willingness to participate in audio-recorded interviews and observed training sessions. Exclusion criteria included individuals who declined recording or observation.

Purposive, criterion-based sampling identified participants likely to provide rich, relevant information about the phenomena of interest (health, discipline, character, and community empowerment). Recruitment was facilitated through gatekeepers at each *perguruan* and at IPSI, who introduced the study to prospective participants. Recruitment continued until the research team judged that thematic saturation had been achieved (i.e., no new substantive themes emerged from successive interviews). Sampling continued until thematic saturation was reached, defined as the point at which no new substantive themes emerged from successive interviews.

2.3 Data collection procedures

Data collection consisted of two complementary methods: semi-structured in-depth interviews and participatory observation. The combination of these methods enabled methodological triangulation, strengthening the credibility of the findings by capturing both articulated experiences and observed practices.

In-depth interviews. The primary data source is semi-structured in-depth interviews. Interviews lasted approximately 45–90 minutes, were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia (or participants' preferred local language), and were audio-recorded with informed consent. The interview guide addressed four domains: (1) personal history and motivations for practicing *pencak silat*; (2) perceived physical benefits and health-related changes since training; (3) experiences of emotional, moral, or character development linked to *silat* pedagogy; and (4) social and community dimensions of practice (membership, mentorship, civic activities, and perceptions of empowerment).

Participatory observation. During participatory observation, training sessions were documented as multifaceted activities encompassing physical, cognitive, and social dimensions. Each session typically included structured exercises such as warm-up routines, *jurus* (forms), and calisthenic movements, followed by reflective segments in which instructors offered moral or philosophical guidance to participants. These post-training discussions often functioned as informal *wejangan* (advice), reinforcing values of discipline, respect, and community solidarity. Observations also extended to larger communal events such as *Suro Agung* (a significant annual gathering) where ritual elements, collective performances, and symbolic acts deepened the participants' sense of belonging and shared identity. Through these immersive observations, links were drawn between the embodied practices of *pencak silat* and their perceived physical, psychological, and social benefits.

2.4 Researcher positionality and reflexivity

The research team maintained reflexive journals and held regular debriefs to surface assumptions, positional effects, and power dynamics between researchers and participants. Positional statements describing researchers' backgrounds (e.g., prior engagement with *silat* communities, disciplinary training, language proficiency) were documented and considered during analysis to reduce bias and to contextualize interpretations.

2.5 Data management and transcription

Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim in Bahasa Indonesia and translate to English. Transcripts were checked against audio files for accuracy. Identifying details were removed or masked; participants were assigned unique codes (e.g., I1, P1) to preserve confidentiality. Transcripts and field notes were stored on encrypted drives accessible only to the research team. Where quotations are used in publication, participant code and reported age (when given) will accompany the quote.

2.6 Data analysis

The data analysis was conducted collaboratively by a team of three researchers to ensure methodological rigor and analytical depth. The first author served as the primary

coder, responsible for leading the coding process and synthesizing findings. Two additional researchers independently coded selected portions of the data to enhance the credibility and reliability of the analysis. Discrepancies in coding were discussed in joint meetings until consensus was reached, ensuring that the final themes accurately reflected participants' perspectives. All data management and coding were facilitated using NVivo 12 Plus software to maintain a systematic and organized analytic process.

The analysis followed a multi-stage, iterative approach consistent with the principles of thematic analysis. The process began with familiarization, during which researchers repeatedly read interview transcripts, field notes, and supporting documents to immerse themselves in the data and record preliminary insights. The coding includes three steps: 1) open coding; 2) axial coding; 3) selective coding.

During the open coding phase, meaningful segments of text were coded across the entire dataset. These codes captured both concrete descriptions such as "*improved stamina*," "*teacher's advice*," and "*community service*" and interpretive patterns like "*moral internalization*" or "*stress regulation*." In the axial coding stage, related categories were integrated to establish broader conceptual relationships, connecting patterns across cases and data sources. Subsequently, during selective coding, these categories were refined and synthesized into overarching themes that represented the core dimensions of the study: *physical health benefits, character formation and emotional regulation, social empowerment, and cultural transmission*.

Each theme was reviewed for internal coherence and external distinctiveness, ensuring that subthemes were clearly defined and accurately represented participant experiences. Final themes were then named and conceptually mapped to illustrate the relationships between practice, mechanisms, and outcomes. Showing how pencak silat contributes to health promotion, moral development, and community empowerment.

2.7 Trustworthiness and credibility

To ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of this qualitative study, multiple strategies were employed, encompassing the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These strategies were integrated throughout the research process from data collection to analysis and reporting to strengthen the validity and transparency of the findings.

Credibility. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement in the field, allowing the research team to establish trust and rapport with pencak silat practitioners, instructors, and organizational leaders across several perguruan. This sustained involvement enabled a deeper understanding of participants' experiences and ensured that the data captured reflected the authentic meanings and contexts of their practice. The researchers also maintained reflexivity by continuously examining their own positionality and potential biases to minimize distortions during data collection, interpretation, and analysis. Furthermore, triangulation of data sources and methods was conducted to enhance validity. Data were obtained from diverse participant groups and collected through multiple techniques, including in-depth interviews, participatory observations,

and document reviews. The convergence of these data sources allowed the researchers to cross-verify findings and confirm recurring patterns across different silat schools and participant categories.

Transferability. Transferability was addressed by providing thick descriptions of the study context, including the cultural and organizational characteristics of each silat school, participant demographics, and the procedural details of data collection. These comprehensive descriptions enable readers to assess the relevance and applicability of the findings to other cultural or community-based settings. The purposive sampling strategy was also clearly documented, explaining how participants were selected based on their experience level and role within the perguruan, thereby supporting the analytical generalization of the results to similar contexts of traditional martial arts and community empowerment.

Dependability. Dependability was ensured through meticulous methodological documentation and the maintenance of an audit trail. Detailed records were kept of research activities, coding iterations, and analytic decisions throughout the thematic analysis process. NVivo 12 Plus software was used to systematically manage data, store memos, and track coding revisions, thereby increasing consistency and transparency. These procedures enable other researchers to assess or replicate the analytic process and confirm that the findings are grounded in systematic inquiry rather than subjective interpretation.

Confirmability. Confirmability was strengthened by multiple validation techniques. Peer debriefing sessions were conducted with academic supervisors and fellow researchers to critically review emerging themes, challenge assumptions, and ensure analytic integrity. Member checking was carried out by sharing preliminary interpretations and thematic summaries with selected participants to confirm that the findings accurately represented their experiences and perspectives. In addition, the first author maintained a reflexive journal throughout the research process, documenting evolving insights, assumptions, and methodological reflections. This practice provided an explicit record of researcher subjectivity and decision-making, supporting transparency and objectivity in the final analysis.

2.8 Ethical considerations

The study protocol received ethical approval from the relevant institutional review board of Universitas Islam Sultan Agung Semarang with number 208/IV/2025/Komisi Bioetik. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation and were free to withdraw at any time without consequence. For participants under 18 years old (if any), parental/guardian consent plus participant assent were obtained. Anonymity and

confidentiality procedures were strictly enforced, and sensitive information was handled with care. Findings are presented in aggregate and with pseudonyms or participant codes to prevent identification.

3 Results and Discussion

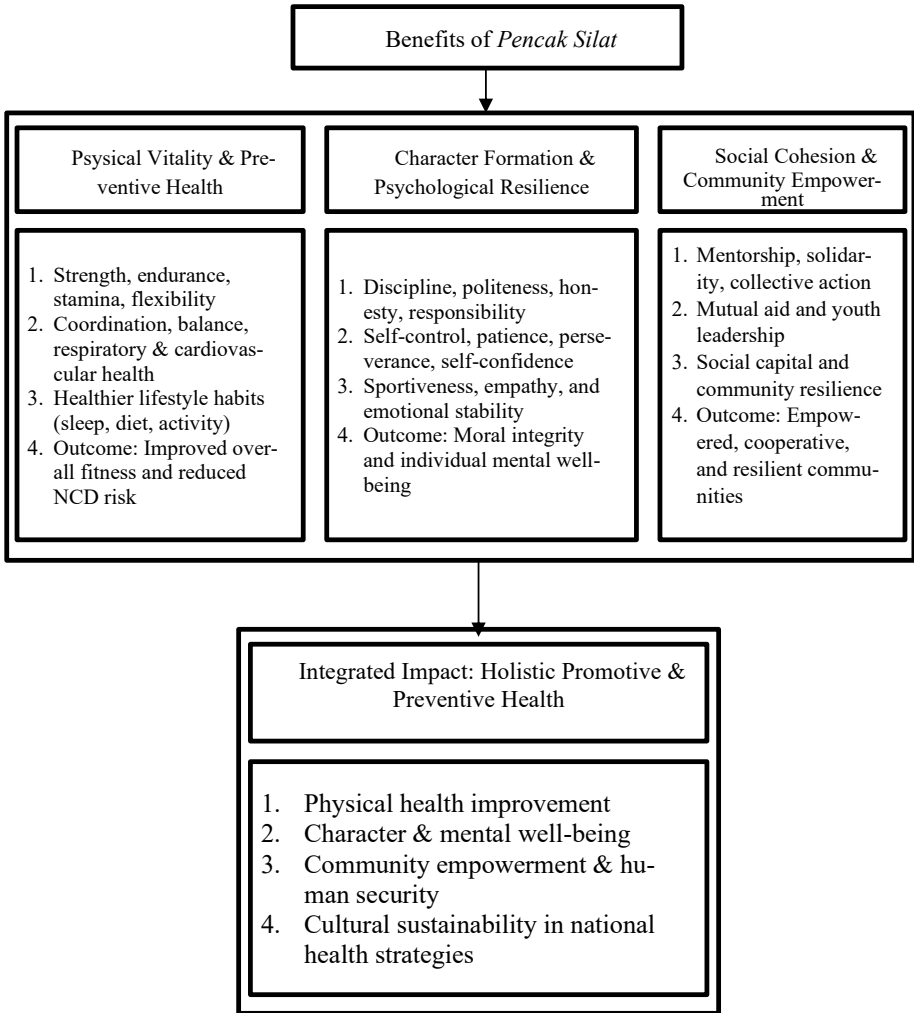


Fig. 1. Visual Diagram of Results & Discussion

Figure 1 illustrates the multidimensional benefits of *Pencak Silat* as identified in the study. The diagram shows that *Pencak Silat* practice generates three main domains of impact: physical vitality & preventive health, character formation & psychological resilience, and social cohesion & community empowerment which interact to produce an integrated impact (holistic promotive and preventive health). Rather than operating as isolated outcomes, these domains interact dynamically, reflecting a biopsychosocial pathway through which embodied cultural practice contributes to holistic promotive and preventive health (Healey et al., 2025; Willhite & Becht-Buss, 2025).

3.1 Physical vitality and preventive health benefits

The study confirms that *pencak silat* contributes to enhanced physical fitness, including improved strength, endurance, stamina, flexibility, coordination, balance, and perceived respiratory/cardiovascular function. Participants commonly reported feeling more energetic and physically capable. As stated in the following statement:

“After regularly training in silat, their lifestyle becomes more orderly. They sleep more soundly, eat more regularly, and their stamina is much better.” –
(11, teacher of Pagar Nusa, 43 years old)

These accounts indicate that *pencak silat* functions not merely as structured physical exercise, but as a regulatory practice shaping everyday health behaviors, aligning with preventive-health frameworks that emphasize lifestyle modification over clinical intervention (Healey et al., 2025; Veasey et al., 2024). A systematic review of martial arts, combat sports, and mental health reported positive associations between training and physical health indices (strength, balance, cardiopulmonary fitness) in adult populations (Ciaccioni et al., 2024). Likewise, a review of “hard martial arts” noted that many studies find benefits in balance, cardiovascular fitness, and muscular strength (Liu & Danaa, 2025b). Moreover, research on Taekwondo interventions shows improvements in both physical and cognitive function, suggesting that martial-arts-style training can protect and enhance bodily systems (Li et al., 2024).

Unlike some prior studies which rely on tightly controlled clinical interventions, this research captures participants’ lived experiences in community settings. It reinforces that even non-elite, culturally situated practice can yield fitness gains. Given these convergent lines of evidence, we can interpret *pencak silat* as a viable preventive health strategy, one that helps maintain fitness, reduce disease risk, and boost physiological resilience.

3.2 Character formation and psychological resilience

Participants described how *pencak silat* shaped moral and psychological traits: discipline, politeness, honesty, self-control, patience, perseverance, self-confidence, and mental resilience. As stated in the following statement:

“The ethical values in Pagar Nusa are like the foundation of character... not only physically resilient, but also morally upright, highly disciplined, humble, and caring toward their environment.” – (P2, head of Pagar Nusa, 58 years old)

“Training late at night, doing push-ups until exhausted, being extremely disciplined with the rules. It felt hard at the time, but it was precisely from that that I learned the meaning of struggle, togetherness, and respecting the teacher.” – (P3, 36 years, Alumnus of PSHW)

These narratives suggest that *pencak silat* operates as an embodied moral pedagogy, where repeated physical discipline is inseparable from ethical internalization and emotional self-regulation (Veasey et al., 2024). This insights align with broader empirical findings in the martial-arts domain. A systematic review found small-to-moderate effect sizes for improved well-being and reductions in internalizing symptoms among practitioners (Moore et al., 2023). The review *Combat sports and wellbeing* further emphasizes that martial-arts and combat-sport participation is increasingly recognized as a way to promote mental health, stress modulation, and social integration (Ciaccioni et al., 2024, 2025). Moreover, a qualitative study of women’s martial-arts practice documented improved self-confidence and relational benefits, which correspond to your findings about psychosocial growth (Eggleton & Skea, 2024).

Unlike critiques that suggest martial arts may foster aggression, participants in this study stressed nonviolence, empathy, and conflict de-escalation. This suggests that *pencak silat* as practiced in this community emphasizes prosocial values and emotional balance. The alignment between participant narratives and wider meta-analytic evidence supports the conclusion that *pencak silat* enhances both character formation and psychological resilience within the biopsychosocial health framework.

3.3 Social cohesion and community empowerment

Beyond individual-level gains, *pencak silat* manifested as a social infrastructure reinforcing bonds, mutual support, and leadership. Members frequently described their perguruan as extended families, offering mentorship, moral guidance, and assistance. As stated in the following statement:

“PSHW Tunas Muda ... shapes a mentality and character that last a lifetime.” – (P3, 36 years, Alumnus of PSHW)

“They don’t just become tough silat practitioners, but also youths who can be trusted ... and useful to the community.”- (P4, 39 years old, Coach of PSHT)

Analytically, these findings resonate with previous studies which community empowerment emphasizes participation, collective efficacy, and social capital as mechanisms for improving health and well-being (Zhang et al., 2025). Systematic engagement in martial arts fosters social cohesion and inclusion, which enhance mental well-being

(Ciaccioni et al., 2025). Additionally, research on culturally sensitive healthcare in Indonesia argues that integrating sociocultural value systems into health practice strengthens community empowerment and trust (Cipta et al., 2024). This suggests that the social bonds formed through silat may act as channels for health promotion, mutual aid, and resilience in local communities. *Pencak silat* operates not only as a training practice but also as a community-building institution. One that bridges individual discipline and collective solidarity, reinforcing the potential for sustainable health and social impact at the group level.

3.4 Cultural identity and human security

Participants frequently described *pencak silat* as more than a martial art: it is a source of cultural identity, dignity, and moral continuity. As stated in the following statement:

“Our grand aim is to make Pagar Nusa a place for the formation of a whole person, not just a silat practitioner who is skilled at fighting.” – (P5, 47 years old, Branch Manager of IKSPI)

“The ethical values of PSHW Tunas Muda shape children into better people ... calmer, less quick to anger ... and more responsible.” – (P6, 61 years old, Elder of PSHW)

These results illustrate how *pencak silat* embodies a moral and spiritual pedagogy that links personal development with cultural heritage. The practice functions as a channel through which values of patience, humility, and responsibility are transmitted, ensuring continuity between generations and strengthening community identity. Such findings correspond closely with global discussions of *culturally sensitive healthcare*, which argue that embedding health promotion in local cultural frameworks enhances trust, engagement, and perceived dignity among participants (Cipta et al., 2024). Culturally grounded health approaches foster belonging and mutual respect, allowing communities to define well-being through their own traditions and moral values (Cipta et al., 2024).

In this sense, *pencak silat* operates not only as a mechanism of physical and psychological empowerment but also as a safeguard of cultural dignity, a core dimension of human security. By integrating moral guidance, ritual, and collective identity, the practice provides psychological stability and social inclusion that reinforce resilience against modern stressors such as alienation and cultural erosion. These findings reaffirm that health promotion is most sustainable when it engages with the moral and cultural foundations of a community, aligning physical well-being with cultural pride and collective meaning.

3.5 Integration into promotive and preventive strategies

The empirical coherence and theoretical alignment support the argument that *pencak silat* could be integrated into health, education, and community development programs

as a culturally grounded approach to holistic health promotion. For instance, the systematic review of physical-activity interventions for mental health notes that martial arts are among the modalities used to foster psychological benefits in group settings (Simpson et al., 2024). Other study argues for advancing health and inclusion through sport-based interventions (Ciaccioni et al., 2025).

In Indonesia, the integration of cultural assets into the health system has become an increasingly important discourse within national health-promotion policy. Recent research on health-financing reforms underscores the necessity of investing in preventive and promotive care through culturally responsive interventions that resonate with local values and practices (Fuady et al., 2024). Complementing this, the concept of culturally sensitive, patient-centered healthcare emphasizes that aligning health interventions with indigenous traditions such as *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation), enhances community legitimacy, participation, and program sustainability (Cipta et al., 2024). Building upon these perspectives, the present study highlights *pencak silat* as a culturally embedded platform with potential for integration into national health-promotion frameworks. Specifically, collaboration with *perguruan* (*silat* schools) could support the delivery of community-based physical and mental wellness programs; incorporating *silat*'s moral and emotional education into school or youth curricula may strengthen value-based health learning; and leveraging *silat* networks for outreach could advance community resilience and preventive health engagement. While previous critiques have warned that martial-arts initiatives risk becoming exclusionary or overly competitive, the current findings demonstrate that *pencak silat* as practiced in Madiun embodies empathy, ethical moderation, and collective responsibility. These attributes position it as a promising, culturally grounded model for sustainable promotive and preventive mental-health strategies in Indonesia.

4 Conclusions

This study concludes that *pencak silat*, as a deeply rooted Indonesian martial art offers multidimensional benefits that encompass physical vitality, character formation, social cohesion, and cultural identity. The practice enhances strength, endurance, stamina, flexibility, coordination, and balance while supporting cardiovascular and respiratory health. Simultaneously, it cultivates discipline, honesty, patience, self-control, confidence, and empathy, thereby promoting both physical well-being and mental resilience.

Beyond individual benefits, *pencak silat* fosters community solidarity and civic engagement through its strong social networks and value-based mentorship. It strengthens social capital and local leadership, contributing to community resilience and empowerment. Culturally, it reinforces a sense of identity and dignity, aligning with the broader concept of human security, which emphasizes health, inclusion, and the capacity to flourish with dignity. These findings highlight the potential of *pencak silat* to serve as a culturally grounded model for promotive and preventive public-health strategies. Integrating it into national health, education, and community programs can bridge traditional values with modern well-being frameworks.

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