

# The evolution of martial arts through history: a systematic review

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## Abstract

The history of martial arts reflects the evolution from survival to physical prowess and mental toughness. However, there are drawbacks to this integration, such as safety concerns and goals alignment with education. This study aimed to describe the historical development of martial arts from ancient times to the present. The literature review found that martial arts significantly address diverse educational goals, focusing on holistic development and integrating physical prowess and mental toughness. Further, martial arts were an essential aspect of how they could be considered to contribute to health and well-being, specifically mental well-being. Likewise, exercises involving MA enhance physical fitness components. Several outcomes revealed that martial arts play a significant role alongside sports and physical activities in shaping societal attitudes toward physical and mental health. Therefore, the evolution of martial arts in physical education from ancient times to the present highlights a significant change toward holistic development, seamlessly integrating physical prowess and mental toughness. Holistic development ensures that individuals are physically fit and mentally prepared to handle life's challenges; for instance, integration helps students increase their physical strength and endurance and develop the mental resilience required to face academic and life challenges.

**Keywords:** Martial arts evolution ; holistic development ; physical prowess ; mental toughness and safety concerns

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## 1. Main text

### 1.1 Introduction

The history of martial arts reflects the evolution from survival to physical prowess and mental toughness. According to Fuller and Lloyd (2019), martial arts enrich dimensions of holistic wellness, aligning perfectly with the needs of an active, dynamic lifestyle (Fuller & Lloyd, 2019). Physical

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education includes martial arts to improve students' self-worth, self-control, and physical fitness (Figueiredo et al., 2020c). However, there are drawbacks to this integration, such as safety concerns and goals alignment with education. Research highlights martial arts' health and mental advantages, indicating that it may be used for more than just physical training to improve social skills and reduce stress (Guo, 2024). When integrating martial arts into physical education programs, careful preparation is needed to combine traditional methods with contemporary educational ideals.

At the international level, the integration of martial arts faces several common challenges. One major issue is the standardization of training protocols, as martial arts vary widely in style and technique across different cultures (Cynarski, 2018) and injuries resulting from martial arts practice (Moore et al., 2020). Furthermore, evaluating martial arts training's effect on student outcomes requires more widely recognized measures, making evaluating these programs more difficult worldwide. Given the physical nature of martial arts, concerns about the physical safety of students and the potential for injury in school settings (Winkle & Ozmun, 2003).

In the Philippines, integrating martial arts encounters distinct challenges. One primary issue is the underrepresentation of traditional Filipino martial arts (FMA) like Arnis in school curricula, overshadowed by more globally popular styles such as Karate or Taekwondo. Additionally, there is often a lack of trained, certified instructors specializing in these local martial arts, limiting accessibility and proper instruction in schools. Concerns regarding the physical safety of students and the potential for injury during martial arts sessions also create hesitation among educators and parents (Malmo, 2016). Furthermore, logistical issues such as inadequate funding for equipment and dedicated training spaces further complicate the widespread adoption of martial arts in the national education system. The acceptability and use of martial arts in various educational systems may be hampered by cultural sensitivities and misconceptions regarding its goals and lessons.

The research gap in the evolution of martial arts centers around the historical progression and educational adaptation of martial arts across different cultures, which has been addressed in existing studies. Current research on martial arts primarily focuses on their physiological and psychological benefits through descriptive and experiential approaches. Unlike most studies that use meta-analysis, this research conducts a systematic review to trace the evolution of martial arts through history. By adopting a comprehensive historical viewpoint, this research reveals how martial arts have adapted to cultural

transitions and shifts in educational policies over the centuries. This broader perspective allows for a deeper understanding of the changing role of martial arts within educational frameworks globally.

## **1.2 Theory Base**

The study is anchored on the cultural evolution theory. This theory examines how martial arts adapt and change over time in response to environmental, technological, and social influences. It focuses on the processes of adaptation and innovation, transmission and diffusion across cultures, and selection and retention of effective practices. Cultural evolution theory also considers the impact of social norms, cultural values, and historical events on martial arts. This approach provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the dynamic evolution of martial arts through different historical periods and cultural contexts

## **1.3 Research Questions**

This study described the historical development of martial arts from ancient times to the present. Specifically, it sought to answer the research question:

1. How has the development of martial arts evolved from ancient times to the present?

## **1.4 Methods**

The research design for this study is a systematic review aimed at comprehensively synthesizing existing literature on the historical development of martial arts within physical education from ancient times to the present. This method involves a structured approach to searching, evaluating, and integrating findings from multiple studies (Pollock & Berge, 2017) to answer the research question.

This systematic review encompasses 15 studies conducted between 1989 and 2024, tracing the evolution of martial arts within physical education from ancient origins to contemporary practices. The review explores diverse backgrounds, starting with the historical roots of martial arts in various cultures, such as China, Japan, and Korea, where martial arts originated as systems of combat and self-defense. Over the centuries, these practices evolved to emphasize physical prowess, mental toughness, and holistic development, seamlessly integrating into educational contexts. The studies reviewed highlight the multifaceted impact of martial arts on physical fitness, mental well-being, and academic outcomes, addressing both the benefits and challenges of their incorporation into modern physical education curricula.

The inclusion criteria involve studies of practitioners with experience in martial arts, encompassing all genders, backgrounds, and skill levels, to provide a comprehensive understanding of the evolution of

martial arts in physical education. It includes research from ancient times to the present, examining the physical, mental, and emotional impacts of martial arts training within educational contexts. The review covers diverse martial arts styles such as Karate, Pencak Silat, Taekwondo, and Arnis and includes historical and anthropological comparisons across cultures to highlight the evolution of these practices. Studies are selected based on their analysis of how martial arts have adapted to societal changes and cultural exchanges, excluding research focusing solely on contemporary practices without historical context and anecdotal or personal narratives lacking scholarly analysis.

### **1.5 Results and Discussion**

The study's purpose is to describe the historical development of martial arts from ancient times to the present. This chapter analyzes the collected data, assesses study quality, synthesizes evidence, and interprets findings.

Table 1 focuses on how martial arts have evolved throughout history, helping to transform old fighting methods into contemporary approaches to self-discipline and fitness. The results revealed that martial arts enrich dimensions of holistic wellness, aligning perfectly with the needs of an active, dynamic lifestyle, creating well-rounded and capable individuals prepared for medieval battles and modern competitive environments, and emphasizing enhancing physical abilities and cultivating mental resilience.

The literature review found that martial arts significantly address diverse educational goals, focusing on physical prowess. Evaluating martial arts reveals that they are a means of improving physical health and a powerful tool for enhancing psychological well-being, social skills, and educational outcomes. Martial arts training is a comprehensive approach that develops mindfulness, enhances readiness for immediate action, and fosters a deep awareness of one's environment.

The result of this study aligns with the study of Fuller and Lloyd (2020), which presented that martial arts was a vital aspect of the ways that could be considered as contributing to health and well-being, specifically within the domain of mental well-being. 'Belonging' and 'collective practice' were highlighted as necessary in promoting a sense of shared identity and a more reflexivity-defined identity that is key to how an individual saw. Another study by Ciaccioni et al. (2024) claims that Martial Arts and Combat Sports have the potential to benefit different aspects of mental health. It is associated with benefits in some components of mental health, including visuospatial perception, response inhibition, externalizing

emotion regulation, and coping skills, but inconsistent, conflicting, or null findings for anxiety, self-related characteristics, depression, attention, learning, memory, planning, and brain structural changes.

Another literature review found that martial arts achieve high levels of physical fitness, agility, and combat effectiveness in specialized training systems. It is a multidimensional process integrating rigorous physical training, skill mastery, psychological conditioning, adaptability, and comprehensive physical care. Martial arts provide a holistic approach to personal development, physically and mentally preparing individuals for the challenges of a globalized world.

The result of the study aligns with the study of Liu and Guo (2024) that exercises involving MA, such as Karate, taekwondo, or Brazilian jiu-jitsu, enhance physical fitness components. It aids in building more muscle, decreasing body fat, and improving general physical health. Learning MA is a practical and all-encompassing approach to developing and maintaining physical health and self-defense abilities. Additionally, Fu's (2024) research explores how university martial arts Sanda might help students acquire mental and physical balance. Sanda's significance for the physical and emotional well-being of university students must be further acknowledged in future educational practices, along with the promotion of its broad integration into the university sports curriculum.

Moreover, martial arts developed mindfulness and readiness for immediate action, including an appropriate state of alertness and maintaining a certain level of attention and awareness of the environment. Integrating mental toughness involves cultivating resilience, focus, and emotional control. It ensures that martial practitioners achieve balance and strength in all aspects of life.

The result of the study aligns with the study of Liu and Wang (2024) that martial arts and psychological development training have substantial advantages in the aspects of the implementation conditions. This integration has also enhanced the students' ability to cope with pressures in real life and played a memorable role in the cultivation of correct physical and mental qualities. The combination of martial arts training and cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) holds great potential as a synergistic approach to improving mental health outcomes. Empirical evidence supports the effectiveness of this combined approach in reducing symptoms of anxiety, depression, PTSD, and anger-related issues (Pujari, 2023). Another study by Kumar and Kumar (2024) claims that promoting mental health awareness within this domain can contribute to a healthier, more resilient athlete community. Combat sports involve a complex interplay of cognitive, emotional, and social factors that can impact an athlete's mental health.

## 1.6 Implication and Future Direction

This chapter presents the researcher's conclusions and recommendations. The researcher summarized the findings to answer the study's problems, while the recommendations are for improving the present status of the topic presented by the researcher.

### Implication

The evolution of martial arts from ancient times to the present highlights a significant change toward holistic development, seamlessly integrating physical prowess and mental toughness. Martial arts have continually adapted and diversified. Holistic development ensures that individuals are physically fit and mentally prepared to handle life's challenges; for instance, integration helps students increase their physical strength and endurance and develop the mental resilience required to face academic and life challenges. Whether for self-defense, holistic development, physical prowess, or mental toughness, the legacy of martial arts continues to inspire and empower people worldwide.

### Future Direction

The study found that integrating martial arts into physical education significantly enhances students' physical fitness and mental and emotional well-being. It supports adopting martial arts as a core part of physical education curricula for holistic student development. School administrators must provide resources and training for teachers to deliver effective martial arts instruction. Policymakers should support these efforts with funding and policies, while parents and community members should advocate for martial arts in schools. Embracing these recommendations can make physical education more diverse and beneficial for students.

## 1.7 Table 1: The Evolution of Martial Arts in Physical Education Through History

| Essential Themes            | Core Ideas                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| holistic development        | enriches dimensions of holistic wellness, aligning perfectly with the needs of an active and dynamic lifestyle.                                                                                                                |
| integrates physical prowess | creating well-rounded and capable individuals prepared for both medieval battles and modern competitive environments.<br>integrating traditional principles with contemporary practices to foster a vibrant, global community. |
| integrates mental toughness | emphasizing the enhancement of physical abilities and the cultivation of mental resilience, social skills, and moral values.                                                                                                   |

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